

## Private Worship

**Psalm 63:1-8** *A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah. O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips. When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches. Because You have been my help, Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice. My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me.*

If you believe statistics, less than 30% of Christians will read their Bibles outside of church. And although statistics are unreliable, most Christians will report difficulty or trouble with praying and meditating on Scripture. If we did an informal poll, and asked all the Christians listening to this to speak on how frequently they met with God in private this last week, and how satisfying the experience was, we might here some disappointing results.

The practice of private worship is becoming rarer among modern Christians. The reasons are probably many: a culture which discourages meditation, churches which paint the Christian life as a treadmill of ministry activity, churches which paint the Christian life as a lecture classroom, declining attention spans, over-busy lives, perpetual noise and discomfort with silence, voracious appetites for entertainment and meagre appetites for contemplation, and a host of other modern maladies.

Added to that are plenty of misconceptions about meeting with God alone that discourage or drive Christians away from it. They are told it should be a time of deep intimacy, and they don't know what that feels like. They are told you need to be completely still and quiet, and they have never been that way except when asleep. For many Christian men, it sounds sentimental and feminine and just rather weird, like beginning your day by reading pink Hallmark cards for 30 minutes. Some are told it is supposed to have feelings of ecstasy, and since they never experienced that, they give up.

From when we are new Christians, we become aware that we should spend time alone with God. Sometimes we hear it in sermons, sometimes it is because we are disciplined, and often we just seem to know that we should meet with God by praying and reading the Word. But very often, we are unsure of exactly how we are to do this.

Most Christians try by just reading the Bible somewhere, and for some reason, they choose books like Hebrews, Revelation or the visions of Ezekiel to begin with. Once they are quite puzzled by what they have read, they try to pray. Some do better than others, but most find their minds wandering, their thoughts distracted, and the whole experience rather unsatisfying. To be frank, many Christians get up from their quiet time feeling more guilty, not less. And their guilt tends to drive them away from consistently, ideally daily, meeting with the Lord.

Most Christians struggle with it. Those that actually do it struggle to know if they are getting it right. Those that don't do it struggle with guilt that they don't do it.

So what exactly are we supposed to do when it comes to private prayer, private worship? You will find as you go through Scripture, in contrast to its treatment of public worship, Scripture is not as explicitly prescriptive regarding the forms of private worship. The Bible gives examples of people worshipping God alone, it certainly describes the means we can commune with God, but it does not lay down laws for times and places and methods. Into this relative silence have poured books on private devotion, suggesting (or commanding) certain times, habits, methods and practices.

I want to draw out several thoughts from Psalm 63. I am not trying to make out that Psalm 63 is about private devotions. Rather, since Psalm 63 is an example of an individual communing with God, we can glean several truths about meeting God alone.

## **I. Private Worship is Private.**

*You are **my** God; Early will I seek You; **My** soul thirsts for You; **My** flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary*

Notice the 1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns here. In contrast to many other psalms, where David speaks in the plural, “Come let us praise the Lord” “we will rejoice and give thanks”. In many of the psalms, David is worshipping in a group, and calls for a corporate response to God. That's not happening here. David is speaking to God alone; he includes no one else in his prayer.

This is private worship, the worship of the individual. Notice, I don't call it the 'quiet time', because it's possible for title like that to mislead us. Our goal is not to be quiet, to have a time of silence, and restful quietude. Silence may or may not be present, but silence is not at the heart of what we are talking about. I prefer to talk about *private worship*. That's what believers are called to do. There are supposed to be times in our lives where we meet with God as individuals, and the pronouns are not we/us/our, but I, me, my, as we talk to God alone, in private.

The Lord Jesus modelled this for us.

**Mark 1:35** *Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.*

*12 Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luk 6:12)*

And Jesus Himself told us

**Matthew 6:6** <sup>6</sup> *"But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.*

Jesus worshipped God alone, and Jesus expected it would be part of our lives too.

What this means is that if you are going to be alone with God, you are going to have to plan to do it. Life has more than enough things for you to do from the time you open your eyes in the morning till the time you close them at night. There will be enough people who want a piece of you: your children, your spouse, your parents, your teachers, your clients, your colleagues. And in today's world, you will be receiving SMSes, emails, calls, Whatsapp messages, Facebook updates, podcasts, and innumerable other digital things saying, read me, check me, update me, answer me.

There's a reason busy Jesus went to a deserted place for private worship. To worship God alone, you need to be alone, and you need time. You need time protected from interruptions and distractions, and you need a space protected from interruptions and distractions. And to truly worship God alone, it should be the only thing you are doing. This is face-to-face time with God. Find a time that works, find a place that works. And change those times and places when they no longer work. Praying in the car, praying while walking is probably not going to enable you to commune with God when there are several other things to focus on.

There is no law that it must be in the morning, though it's probably the time when most of us are not exhausted from the day, and we can spend time with God. Most teachers and pastors and writers have felt that the morning is best. If you are working a job that does not allow that, or if you have infants or little children that make it hard to do that, try to carve out another time in the day.

## II. Private Worship is Personal

Notice whom David is seeking.

*O God, You are my God; Early will I seek **You**; My soul thirsts for **You**; My flesh longs for **You** In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. So I have looked for **You** in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory.*

What is David's aim in private worship? What is he after? David is not looking for information about God. David is not looking to just up his biblical literacy. David wants to meet with God alone so as to know God.

He is not getting alone with God to make sure he stays on track with his yearly Bible-reading program. He is not getting alone with God to pray through a list for the umpteenth time. He is not getting alone with God to superstitiously protect his day from calamities and ask for protection and provision over his loved ones.

David is seeking God as a person. Worship is knowing and loving God. This is a personal encounter with God in His Word and prayer, where you, *the person*, seek to know God, *the person*.

And let's just confess that we rather squirm at the thought of God's eyes being on us, and we rather fear the light of His scrutiny. That's why we must know and love the Gospel so well, so that we understand that in this personal encounter, God sees you in Christ. *22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10:22)*

This is why we pray in Jesus' name – we approach in the person and work and merits of Jesus Christ.

Part of our problem is that we de-personalise this encounter, maybe to make it feel a little less intimidating. We make it about reading, we make it about understanding truth, we make it about a healthy discipline of daily Bible reading. But all of that can still fall short of directly engaging with God. Picture a human friendship where you meet your friend for coffee, and upon arriving, you don't say a word to each other. You just read something on your own, and once you're finished you ask you friend for about twenty or thirty favours. Even if you had the kindest friend in the world, I doubt you would feel any closer to that person if that's all you did.

So it is when we come to God's Word, and treat it like some disconnected information. It is not enough to just read the Bible, as if that by itself will cause adoration. Adoration means seeking a Person in the pages. Make up your mind to use the time you set apart to do nothing less than seek to know and adore God Himself.

## III. Private Worship Is Purposeful

*Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory*

David is not aimless in this personal encounter with God. David is desirous of learning more about

God because he desires God. Look at the images: God is water for David's thirst. God is a beautiful sight in the sanctuary. God is luxurious food for David's soul.

You get the idea that David is deliberately seeking God Himself, hoping to know God more and satisfy his soul.

In fact, David is so certain that God Himself will satisfy his soul that he says this in verse 3: 3  
*Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. (Psa 63:3)*

Look at David's confidence in verse 5: 5 *My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips. (Psa 63:5)*

Scan your eyes down this psalm and pick up the affections which David expects in his encounter with God. "long" "better" "bless" "satisfied" "praise" "rejoice". David thinks of this encounter as an experience worth pursuing.

Here is another point of failure. Many of us have not broken through to experiencing private worship a soul-satisfying. It is a burden, a bother, a distraction, a source of guilt.

Do you remember the words of George Muller, the 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor and man responsible for so many orphan-houses? As he struggled with wondering of mind and other distractions, he came to this conclusion:

"I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, or how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit."

The pursuit of God is a joy. Private worship is the pursuit of the joy of adoring God.

Picture a marriage counsellor doing pre-marital counselling with an engaged couple. He says to the husband-to-be, "In a few weeks, you get to spend quality time with her everyday!" And the man says, "Do I have to?" And the counsellor replies, "Well, it's not really like that. You get to!" To which the young man responds, "But what will happen to me if I don't?" well, we'll look at that young man and wonder about the health of the relationship.

When we love someone, the obligation to spend time with them is a delightful duty.

So, if you miss a time of private worship, you have not broken a commandment, you have missed an opportunity. And in a healthy, loving relationship, when you miss an opportunity to be with the Person you love, you do not go into a guilty corner to sulk, you simply take the next opportunity to be with that Person.

I think we would have to say, that our age is not an age of adoration. We are very busy, very rushed, filled with activities, but we are not often admirers of God. Admiration is something very weak in a people continually distracted, continually bouncing from one distraction to another. But yet, no one has to be persuaded to adore something they genuinely adore. When people want to admire something, they already have all the motivation they need!

If you are not sure that encountering God will satisfy your soul, then all I can do is quote someone who was convinced “Taste and see that the Lord is good!”

#### **IV. Private Worship is Patterned After Public Worship**

*2 So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. (Psa 63:2)*

David does not see a huge difference between loving God in the sanctuary, which would be the Tabernacle, the place of corporate worship, and loving God alone. David often weds the two together.

*4 One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple. (Psa 27:4)*

*2 My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 3 Even the sparrow has found a home, And the swallow a nest for herself, Where she may lay her young-- Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts, My King and my God. 4 Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; They will still be praising You. Selah (Psa 84:2-4)*

There's a funny idea out there, that private worship is totally different to public worship in character, in tone, in approach. In the assembly, its exalted, but in private, it's intimate, almost romantic. In the assembly, it's reverent and joyful, but in private it's familiar and friendly.

Now we know there are differences: In church we say, “we praise you”, “give us” “forgive us” and in private you will say, “I praise you” “forgive me” “grant me”. When speaking to the Lord in private, you will speak to Him about matters, some of which you wouldn't share in the public assembly. You will confess your own sins. You will give thanks for His blessings to you. You will ask Him for things particular to your life.

Obviously the focus is more personal, and in that sense it is different. But should it be completely different in character? Is God like a King when we meet in public, but like a boyfriend when we meet Him alone? Is God like a loving Father when we meet in public, but like a best pal when we meet Him in secret? No. God is who and what He is whether we adore Him in public, or whether we adore Him in private. God is all that He is all the time. He is always majestic, holy, loving. The psalms that we use in public were written by David in private.

And for that reason, we find the pattern for private worship in corporate worship. What do we do in corporate worship? We ask God to open our eyes to Scripture, we read the Bible, we sing the truths of Scripture, we have an extended meditation on Scripture, called a sermon. If you have an appetite for what we do at church, you transfer some of that to your private worship.

When you meet with God, that's exactly what you do: read the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible. Open it, ask God to help you understand, read it, meditate on it, and respond to God about what you are reading in prayer, be it singing or speaking.

So here is a simple approach. You open the Scriptures and you find a Scripture that reveals some aspect of God's character or work. The easiest, and simplest place to look is the Psalms, or the Gospels. All Scripture reveals God, but some Scriptures lead us to adoration in a more straightforward way. Don't start in Numbers or in the the minor prophets.

Read it carefully. Don't look for some hidden meaning. Simply read to understand. Ask these questions: What does it say about God? What does it mean for life? How should I respond? Warren

Wiersbe said, "Talk to your Bible if you expect it to talk to you." Interrogative meditation is reverently interrogating the text of Scripture with questions, as we seek the beauty of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in its pages. What does it say, what does it mean, what shall I do?

I encourage you to consider George Muller's method. Or consider Martin Luther's method of meditating on the Lord's Prayer or the Ten Commandments as fuel for your communing with God.

## **V. Private Worship is Physical**

*3 Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. 4 Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. 5 My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips. (Psa 63:3-5)*

David worships God in private not with silent and motionless thoughts. David worships God with his lips, with his lifted hands, with his mouth. David verbalised his worship; David gestured in worship, in short, David used his body to express what his mind and soul were encountering.

Let me give you one more hidden and surprising enemy to private worship: being as still and quiet and non-physical as possible. The prayer is silent and mental. The body is motionless, sitting in a chair. The only thing moving is your eyes. But pretty soon something else moves – your mind – it wanders.

And no wonder. We are meant to worship with our bodies as well as our minds. The Hebrews had a better understanding of the human person than the Greeks would have. Greek Platonism taught that the body and the material world are evil or inferior to the spirit. So the thinking becomes, the more spiritual a quiet time, the less external and physical, and the more internal and quiet - another reason I don't like the words 'quiet time'

We are embodied persons, our bodies are core to what we do. The Hebrews prayed out loud. The Hebrews sang out loud. Even the Hebrew word for meditate means to mutter – to repeat Scripture verbally and speak in low tones to yourself about it.

When we try to worship without our bodies, the result is a kind of unreal, disembodied experience that starts to feel more like studying, like thought experiments than it does like engaging with another person. We know God does and can hear our thoughts, but in not other situation do we communicate entirely with thoughts. Most often we have to physically verbalise, gesture, speak, get into a certain posture.

In corporate worship we use our bodies. Our tongues and lungs and lips and teeth verbalise these songs, which our ears take in. We listen to prayers and say Amen. We hear the Word verbally read into our ears. We hear the Word preached. We stand up and sit down in reverence. In some churches, there are kneelers. At communion, we eat and drink. Our eyes take in the appearance of other believers worshipping, the sight of the text, and the music before us. Perhaps this is why for so many, corporate worship is more engaging than private.

Use your body in private worship. Get used to praying some of your prayers out loud. Sing or hum those hymns most dear to you. Sit, but also kneel, and stand. Write, if it helps. Use your lips, and your hands, and your knees, and your ears as you speak with God as person to person.

David cannot make you want to commune with God. But David has shown us what private worship is like. It is one-on-one with God. It is seeking God as a person, purposefully, because God is satisfying. It is very much like corporate worship, and it should engage all of us.

Let's get the myths out the way. Let's put the discouragements and setbacks behind us. Let's each one of us meet with God alone, and taste and see that the Lord is good.