

Solitary Spirituality Survival Skills

Psalm 63:1 <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. 2 So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. 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. 6 When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the *night* watches. 7 Because You have been my help, Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice. 8 My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me. 9 But those *who* seek my life, to destroy *it*, Shall go into the lower parts of the earth. 10 They shall fall by the sword; They shall be a portion for jackals. 11 But the king shall rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him shall glory; But the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped. (Ps. 63:1-11)

I've occasionally watched an episode of one of those survivalists, and found it quite fascinating. The man is dropped into some remote wilderness place, and for a day or two, he has to survive alone and make his way to some point miles away. Along the way, he needs to find his food from the available plants and animals, avoid the dangers, find drinkable water, and make a shelter to sleep in. Watching the man identify what plants and insects can be eaten, what can be used to start and keep fires, fighting off snakes makes for pretty interesting viewing.

But the reason it's interesting is that for most of us, and for most people, it's abnormal. We don't live as solitary foragers in wilderness areas. We live in towns and cities. Some of the most dangerous things we face when getting our food are impatient people pushing their trollies recklessly. Except if camping and outdoorsmanship is one of your hobbies, most of us probably don't keep track of how to survive on the fauna and flora of Africa. Instead, we live in communities, where we are dependent on a massive network of goods and services that makes life work. If we were dropped into a solitary survival situation, we might not do too well. I know I wouldn't. My life is built around the relative consistency of city life.

Right now, Christians nearly worldwide, are experiencing something like having been dropped in a wilderness. The communal aspect of our faith has been removed. We can't worship together, we can't take the Lord's Supper, we can't spend time in small group Bible studies.

Removing the corporate, public aspect of our faith is not a small, optional part of our faith. It's vital to us. You remember the story of the two Christians who were sitting one winter night before a fireplace discussing their faith. The one man said he didn't see the church and worship as really necessary, and felt he could get along well enough on his own. The other Christian took his tongs, reached into the fire, and removed a red-hot coal from the fire. He then placed it on the floor, just outside the fire. "Let's see how well this coal does on its own." As they watched, the coal that had been removed from the other coals slowly lost its heat, while the others, which were together, remained red-hot. By the time it went out, the one Christian said to the other, "believers together keep each other on fire for God. When we remove ourselves from fellowship, we may go for a short time, but we lose our spiritual desire and grow cold."

I've said that to many Christians over the years who were drifting away from faithfulness to the local church. But in this moment, we now find ourselves in a situation where we are all absent from corporate worship, not by negligence, but by law. In other words, we are now all in the dangerous situation of that coal that has been separated from the others. Or to change the metaphor, we have all been dropped into a wilderness away from the city, and have to survive on our own.

There are real dangers in this time. There is the danger of growing spiritual cold. Without others to

encourage and provoke us to good works, we can find ourselves neglecting spiritual disciplines like prayer and the Word and personal holiness.

There is the danger of corruption. For those who cannot yet work, the danger is to just pass the time with television and Youtube or Netflix, all the while growing more spiritually numb and indifferent because of the deadening effect of what we're watching.

There is the danger of growing selfishness. When we lack opportunity to serve each other, we can become inward, just consumed with our own interests, our own hobbies, family, health. And with growing selfishness comes deepening independence. First Corinthians 12 does not encourage us to act or feel or think we are independent of the body of Christ, but that we are dependent, mutually interdependent.

There is even the danger of deception. Again, too much time allows the temptation to listen to too many voices. While there are helpful voices out there, there are usually twice as many voices either dealing in false doctrine, conspiracy theories, or some other kind of time-wasting speculation.

And during a time of exile, Christians will need some solitary survival skills. This is not normal Christianity, it is abnormal. But what you do during this abnormal time is going to affect the kind of Christian you are by the time we return to normal Christianity. You can end up spiritually dehydrated during this time. You could end up with spiritual food-poisoning during this time. You could end up with atrophied spiritual muscles during this time. When we finally return to corporate worship, some may actually be very sick, very cold. Some may not even want to return at all.

So it's vital that we are able to keep ourselves spiritually healthy, even while we are unable to return to corporate worship.

But gladly, the Bible does have an example of someone who was prevented from corporate worship, and learnt some spiritual survival skills while solitary. We see this in Psalm 63.

After killing Goliath, David worked in Saul's palace in Gibeah for about seven years, till he was about 22. By the end of that time, Saul had become insanely jealous of David, and had decided to assassinate him. David had to start running to save his life.

For the next eight years, David is in exile. For the first four of those years, Saul was actively hunting David. The one place that David wanted to go was the Tabernacle, the place of corporate worship.

During this time, the Tabernacle was based in a city called Nob very near Jerusalem, after Shiloh had been burned by the Philistines. The Ark wasn't there at Nob, it was in a city known as Kiriath Jearim, another city close to Jerusalem.

And in fact, the very first place that David went when he first started running was to Nob, where he ate some of the shewbread. But the result of his visit there was that after David had gone, Saul accused the priests at Nob of conspiring against him, and had eighty-five of the priests and their families murdered. David knew that if he ever went to the place of corporate worship, he would put other people in danger, and would likely be captured. He knew that as long as Saul was alive, he could not go to the Tabernacle and worship God with God's people. He was in exile.

Several of the psalms were written during this time, according to their titles. Psalms 18, 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 142 were all written when David was being persecuted. But Psalm 63 is perhaps the clearest of those psalms telling us what David did during this time of exile. If we look closely, we will find in this psalm the survival guide when our Christianity has to be solitary for a season.

David wrote Psalm 63 when he was cut off from the Tabernacle and could not worship with God's people. We see it in the title of the psalm. A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah. (Ps. 63:1). We also know it because of verses 1, 9 and 10

My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. The dry and thirsty land was very likely the desert areas of Judah where David hid at certain times while fleeing from Saul. Verses 9, 10 and 11 speak of those who are after David and slandering him as some sort of political rebel. But those *who* seek my life, to destroy *it*, Shall go into the lower parts of the earth. 10 They shall fall by the sword; They shall be a portion for jackals... But the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped. (Ps. 63:1-11)

Now in this psalm, we can see two things that a believer in exile, a believer in the wilderness must do.

I. Believers in the Wilderness Must Desire God

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. 2 So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory.

David begins by making the point that he is in a relationship with God. This is tremendously important. This is not the desiring of a man unacquainted with God. It is not the seeking of a man who had no relationship with God. David is affirming that between him and God there is a covenant, a relationship based on God's oath. David is saved, a regenerate believer. No one can seek and desire God unless God has first sought him and saved him.

Notice the 1st person pronouns here *I, my, me*. 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. He is in exile, and so this psalm is such a model for us when we cannot come together and the Our Father, give Us Our daily bread must now be replaced with my Father, I look for you.

In the first two verses, David tells us how much he desires God. He is seeking, but he is not yet talking about finding. He is here talking about fainting for God, but not yet talking about feasting. In these first two verses, the mode of speech is about looking, seeking, wanting, chasing, pursuing.

Look at the actions of verse 1 and 2: seek You, thirst for You, long for you, looked for You. These are all words of seeking and desiring.

Look at the intensity of the actions: early will I seek you. This verb is found in Psalms only here and at 78:34. It speaks both of earnestness and sacrifice. What does he mean by seeking early?

It can refer to the time of day, being willing to meet with God first thing.

It can also refer to the time of life, seeking God in your youth.

It can refer not to time, but to attitude: diligently seeking, seeking without procrastination.

It can also refer to fervency: seeking with zeal, not with apathy.

Combine all those, and you have someone who was seeking God zealously, sacrificially, as a priority.

Look at the images: My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. David is looking for his soul's relief and thirst to be quenched in God himself.

How did David get this great spiritual appetite? Verse 2 tells us: he worshipped at the sanctuary. 2 So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. He can't do it anymore, but that was where the joy and desire was kindled.

Warren Wiersbe says, "It is our regular worship that prepares us for the crisis experiences of life. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us, and David had in him a deep love for the Lord and a desire to please Him. Because David had seen God's power and glory in His house, he was able to see it in the wilderness as well!"

But every appetite grows with use, and declines with non-use. When you don't desire God, the right thing to do is to begin seeking Him as if you do. If you notice you have little desire for God, the worst thing you can do is keep acting like you don't desire God.

Think about a time like this. For those who are still locked down, or those who have more time on their hands, what are you spending large amounts of that time on? Think about time spent on the web: reading up on your health and your diet; how much time pursuing mysteries, conspiracy theories, or truther claims, gossip magazines, celebrity news, pop music, popular movies how much time spent gaming, how much time watching trivial stuff.

I have sometimes met someone with an inordinate fascination or expertise about something that will affect their lives very little, and I've wondered, how much time did it take to get that knowledgeable? What if he or she had spent that time seeking God? What if those hours had been invested in prayer, the Word, other believers? But where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also. The thing that you feed is what is growing in your life.

We could measure it by the time spent. We could measure it by the effort expended. We could measure it by the sacrifice or difficulty accepted. We could measure it by the perseverance. In any area of your life, we know what you are seeking by how much time you put in, how persistent you are, how much interest and fervency you show, how many obstacles you put up with.

David probably didn't have much with him when he was hiding in the caves of Judah. He certainly didn't have a printed or online Bible. He certainly didn't have a Internet of Bible knowledge at his fingertips. But he had set his heart to seek God.

A.W Tozer wrote a whole book about seeking God. He called it *The Pursuit of God*. In it he wrote: "*I want deliberately to encourage this mighty longing after God. The lack of it has brought us to our present low estate. The stiff and wooden quality about our religious lives is a result of our lack of holy desire. Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth. Acute desire must be present or there will be no manifestation of Christ to His people. He waits to be wanted. Too bad that with many of us He waits so long, so very long, in vain.*"

It is a wonderful thing to have believers exhort you when you see them every week, and they encourage you and restore your zeal. But when you can't see them, and you are alone, you must know how to survive in the wilderness. The first way is that you must desire God.

II. Believers in the Wilderness Must Delight in God

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. 6 When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the *night* watches.

7 Because You have been my help, Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice. 8 My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me.

Here is an interesting contrast. In verses 1 and 2, David is fainting for God. But in verse 5, David is feasting on God: 5 My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness . In the first two verses, David is seeking, thirsting, longing, looking for God. But look at the actions from verse 3 onwards: praise You, bless You, lift up my hands in Your name, satisfied, praise You, meditate on You, rejoice, follows.

The seeking has now become finding, the thirsting has become drinking, the longing has become satisfaction, the looking has become seeing. David is delighting in God. God has become like a rich meal he enjoys. God has become like a mother bird protecting her young under her wings to David. David is experiencing rich provision and protection and help, and so he delights in God.

David, separated from the Tabernacle and unable to worship with God's people, holds a private worship service every day. What does he do in this service? He praises God, blesses God, lifts up his hands in God's name, meditates on God's person. It sounds like a worship service where we pray and meditate on the Word. Some of our prayers are spoken, some of our prayers we sing as hymns. We read the Word, and then we meditate and think on it as we explain it. And through this, we come to delight in God.

Now think about it. David didn't have a written Bible, like most believers in history before the advent of printing. What did he have? He had whatever he had memorised, and he had prayer. And there in the wilderness, David took the time to get down on his knees, lift his hands, pray out loud – verse 3 his lips, verse 5, his mouth. He likely sang. And when lying down, he tried to remember what the Word had taught him about God.

If you want to come out on the other side of this coronavirus crisis and not be a stone cold Christian, almost ready to be extinguished, then hear the example of Psalm 63: a believer in the wilderness takes the time to delight in God.

Now let me encourage you in an unusual way. It is more important, in this regard, that you take the time to pray, than it is that you read your Bible. Many Christians believe that they should read their Bible every day, and I do think that's an important habit. But many Christians read their Bible, and that's really all they do, because reading your Bible doesn't require much spiritual concentration, much humility, confession, intercession, thanksgiving. You can read your Bible and keep your conscience and God at arm's length. But you cannot do that if you really pray. That's what David was doing. He didn't have a Bible to read. His “quiet time” was prayer. Of course, prayer, to be of any use, needs to be informed by Scripture, shaped by Scripture. It should be a response to Scripture. But if you want to truly delight in God, then you have to embrace the difficulty and the irksomeness of prayer.

If you feel intimidated by prayer, then let me give you four practical tips.

First, be short. Everywhere you turn in Scripture, the prayers are short. Jesus actually told us on the Sermon on the Mount to pray using less words, not more. The prophets of Baal prayed all day, but Elijah's prayer was exactly 29 words in the original Hebrew. By one reckoning, the Bible records 222 prayers. Leaving out the 72 prayers in the psalms (which are more like planned hymns than spontaneous prayers), we come to 150 prayers. Here is what is surprising, perhaps even shocking. The average length in an English translation of these recorded prayers is 94 words. What this tells us is that it is far better to pray what you mean, and mean what you pray than to lengthen your

prayers until they are so thin they're transparently meaningless. In prayer, less is more. Pray shorter, and you will soon find that you are praying more. You'll be encouraged, and you'll come back to your shorter prayers more frequently.

Second, copy. When Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer, He was giving us a prayer to copy. He didn't mean it is the only prayer we should pray. He meant we should use it, copy it, build upon, build around it. That's a great place to start. Pray the Lord's Prayer and apply it to your life. Then use one of Paul's prayers. Pray the psalms. If you humble yourself to admit that you cannot fly on your own, you will find the Holy Spirit giving you wings when you use the Bible to pray.

Third, don't worry about how prayerful you feel. Some days you will feel close to God, some days you will not. Some days you will feel forgiven, some days you will not. If you pray and then watch yourself to see if you are feeling loving, or forgiven, or convicted, or pious, you have subtly shifted your focus from God to yourself. Instead, keep your focus and gaze upon God Himself. Worship Him. Praise Him, bless Him, love Him, confess, petition Him. Let your feelings be like your shadow. It's there, but sometimes it's accurate, and sometimes it's really distorted. You can't act by watching your shadow. Focus on God and pray. Know that what really matters is that in Jesus your prayers are accepted, and in the Holy Spirit your prayers are perfected.

Fourth, include your body in your prayer. 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.

We are embodied persons, our bodies are core to what we do. The Hebrews prayed out loud. The Hebrews sang out loud. In fact, the one time when we see someone praying with silent lips moving, it was Hannah, and the priest thought she was drunk! It doesn't mean silent prayer is wrong; it simply shows that the Hebrews were used to verbalised prayers.

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 no other situation do we communicate entirely with thoughts. Most often we have to physically verbalise, gesture, speak, get into a certain posture.

One of the reasons why our corporate worship affects us and sticks in our minds is that 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.

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.

Don't be afraid to be short. You'll end up praying more frequently. Don't be afraid to copy. It will give you a structure to build on. Don't focus on your feelings – focus on God. Don't be shy to kneel or speak up.

David had made this a discipline in his life. We saw in verse 2 that he sought God early. In verse 6 he says . 6 When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the *night* watches. □ Guards stood night duty that was changed every four hours. It simply means that David frequently took his waking

hours and used them for prayer.

Again, it is a wonderful thing to have believers worship with you every week, and hear their prayers and sing with them and pray with them. But when you can't see them, and you are alone, you must know how to survive in the wilderness. The second way is that you must delight in God in prayer. Without this as a habit, your heart will grow cold and distant from God, and all manner of unhelpful things will breed in that vacuum. Let the clean and fresh wind of worship blow through your heart and mind, and you will remain growing and useful to Christ.

David's exile lasted eight years. He emerged after Saul's death, and was coronated king. One of his first acts once king in Jerusalem, was to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. What does that show? David's soul had not withered or shriveled during his time of exile. Once that was over, the first thing he wanted was the worship of God with His people. David had remained spiritually healthy, though denied an essential of spiritual wellbeing: corporate worship. How did he do it? He desired God fervently. He delighted in God faithfully.

I don't know how long our wilderness of being prevented from meeting will last. But how we come out on the other side will partly be determined by our spiritual survival skills while we're there. So, what are you desiring during this time? Time-wise, interest-wise, persistence-wise, enthusiasm-wise what are you seeking? It should be God Himself.

How are you delighting in God? Not just Bible reading; not just sermon-listening, not just book reading. Praising and communing with God directly in prayer.

I pray we'll emerge as spiritual survivalists: people who can seek and find God in a dry and thirsty land.