

My Soul Clings to You

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Date: 22 June 2025

Preacher: Rev. Jeff Simpson

- [0 : 0 0] Kevin Twitt, who is the campus minister at Belmont University and the founder of the hymn writing group, Indelible Grace, which you might be familiar with, who sing some of their songs from time to time.
- And he tells the story of George Matheson, who wrote the song, Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go.
- And he tells a story about George Matheson, who is a pastor in Scotland in the 1800s. And he was training to be a pastor in seminary. And while he was in seminary, he started going blind.
- And during that time, in seminary, as he was starting to go blind, he was also engaged to a woman who eventually left him because she didn't want to be married to a blind man.
- And he was incredibly heartbroken. And at that time, he was also living with his sister, who helped take care of him as he was going blind, as his eyesight was receding.
- [1 : 0 6] And his sister would take care of him. And he wrote this hymn. He wrote the hymn, Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go, on the night of his sister's wedding. Because now she was going off to her own life.
- And she was leaving him alone. And Matheson said that in the wake of these two events in his life, something like an incredible sadness passed between him and the Lord. But as he experienced this sadness, and as he brought it to the Lord in prayer, this hymn, this beautiful hymn came to him all of a sudden, in the span of about 15 minutes.
- And Matheson said it was like the Lord was just dictating to him the words of this hymn. And we have this incredible hymn that we sing many years later that we'll come back to again later.
- But I think that something like this may have happened as King David wrote many of the psalms. This morning, we're going to be looking at our psalm passage, Psalm 63.
- It's a psalm that's written by King David. And if you're unfamiliar with the psalms, it's important to know that originally they were Israel's hymn book.
- [2 : 1 5] They were hymns. They were songs that were used in the worship life of Israel. And you may have noticed if you've been around for a while that we often use them the same way. We sing them together as part of our worship life in our church.
- And there are so many things that I love about the psalms. There are so many things to say. But one of the things I love about the psalms is that they teach us how to pray. And they teach us how to pray by giving us these rich images, these rich metaphors, this rich language that describes our rich emotional life, the ups and downs of our inner life.
- And in the psalms, we find both joy and sadness. We find both anger and love. And we find both despair and hope.
- And as we read in the study of the psalms, they teach us how to bring these broad range of emotions to God in prayer. And so before we're going to look at how Psalm 63 teaches us how to pray.

But before we do that, it's important to understand the backstory behind the psalm. If you open your Bibles and turn to Psalm 63 or you see it printed in your bulletin, you'll see that this psalm has a title.

[3 : 26] It has a title. And the title reads like this. It says a psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah. We know of two different times when David fled to the wilderness and both times his life was in danger.

The first time is in 1 Samuel chapter 21 when David was not yet a king. Saul was king and King Saul was after him. He was after David and he was trying to kill him out of jealousy.

So he fled to the wilderness. The other time that we know David was in the wilderness is in 2 Samuel 15, later on when David was king, when he became king. And this is the time in David's life when his son Absalom rebelled against him and staged somewhat of a coup against him.

And so scholars debate which instance provides the better backstory for Psalm 63. But I think the second option is more likely because here in this psalm, David refers to himself. He refers to himself as the king, as the king.

So to set the scene in 2 Samuel 15, David is king in Jerusalem. But his son Absalom is secretly scheming behind his back to claim the throne for himself.

[4 : 38] For four years, Absalom has sowed seeds of discord, convincing people throughout the land that he would make a better king than his father. And we read this tragic, we read this tragic line in 2 Samuel 15, 6, that Absalom had stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

And eventually Absalom gained the followers throughout the land to stage a coup. And when David eventually learns about this, he realizes that the tides have turned and he fears for his very life.

And so he and his men flee to the east of the city of Jerusalem. And east of the city of Jerusalem is this wilderness between the city and the Jordan River.

This is the sorrowful backstory behind this psalm. And in it, David, King David teaches us to pray two prayers. And this is what we're going to look at this morning. The two prayers that this psalm teaches us to pray are, Lord, here I am in my longing.

And Lord, here I am in my hopelessness. Lord, here I am in my longing. And here I am in my hopelessness. Let's look at the first one. First of all, the first prayer that this psalm teaches us to pray.

[5 : 52] The first section, verses one through five, is Lord, here I am in my longing. David begins the psalm by acknowledging the deep thirst of his soul.

Look at verse one. Oh, God, you are my God. Earnestly, I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you.

As in a dry and weary land where there is no water. And we said just a minute ago, this is what the psalms do. They give us this rich language to describe our invisible inner life.

They help us to articulate the deep desires that all of us have inside. And the image that David gives us here is this. He says, My heart feels like a desert.

My soul is thirsty. And this makes sense when you think about what's going on. The backstory, his whole life, the life of Israel, the whole life of the kingdom has been turned upside down.

[6 : 55] And I think this psalm gives us permission to name the fact that sometimes this is how our souls feel.

Sometimes our hearts can feel like a desolate place. And all the great spiritual teachers throughout church history who have written about prayer have known this.

They often describe the heart as a barren place or as a desert. All of the great Christian masters on prayer have learned what David has learned.

That it's in the desert that we learn how to pray. It's in the desert that we learn how to pray. And notice where David directs his thirsty soul.

He directs his thirsty soul to God. He says, My soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you. And knowing the backstory actually provides a lot of depth into what David is saying here.

[7 : 53] Because David is in an actual, he's in an actual physical desert. And I don't know about you, but I probably would not have been as spiritual as him. I probably would have been asking God to provide me with actual, literal food and water.

And that necessarily wouldn't be a bad prayer. But David is recognizing that there is a thirst underneath all his thirst. And that it is a thirst for God.

That there is a hunger underneath all of his hungers. And that it's a hunger for God. And he knows, based on past experience, he knows that his hunger and thirst for God is satisfied in worship.

In worship. He's in the desert, but he's recalling past experiences in the sanctuary with God's people. Where God met him in his longing.

Look at verses 2 and 4. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life.

[8 : 59] My lips will praise you. He's saying, God, I have had experiences with you. I've had experiences with you in worship. Where you have shown me your power.

You've shown me your glory. Where you've shown me. And I've experienced that your love. Is even more satisfying than life itself. Verse 5.

My soul will be satisfied. As with fat and rich food. And my mouth will praise you with joyful lips. David knows that the deepest, most hidden, most invisible desires of his soul aren't satisfied with mere physical food.

But with the spiritual food that God makes available to his people in worship. And the same, brothers and sisters, the same is true for us.

Friends, why do we gather every Sunday for worship? I mean, there's, why do we gather, why do we gather this morning? There's a lot of reasons we could say, you know, for fellowship. To spend time with one another.

[10 : 03] To be encouraged. To learn from God's word. All of those things are true. All of those things are good. But if we look at what David is saying here in this psalm. One of the primary reasons that we gather for worship week in and week out.

Is our longing. Our desire. The deep desires and longings of our hearts. Because we have a longing in our souls that only the presence and love of God can satisfy.

And we long to experience God satisfying the hunger underneath all of our hungers. In his memoir, The Confessions, St. Augustine puts it like this.

You have made us for yourself, O Lord. And our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Many centuries later, another theologian named Bruce Springsteen would put it like this.

Bruce Springsteen would sing these words. Everybody's got a hungry heart. Everybody's got a hungry heart. Whether you've heard that song or not. I hope you have. But whether you've heard that song or not.

[11 : 13] We all know what that means. That all of us have a longing in our souls. That bread alone. Even the best meal. The best restaurant in the whole world. Cannot satisfy.

Do you know? Do you know that we acknowledge this every time we come into worship? We acknowledge this reality every time at the very beginning of our service.

We just prayed it a few minutes earlier. It's called the Call It for Purity. And the first couple lines of the Call It for Purity go like this. Almighty God, to you all hearts are open.

And all desires are known. Worship begins with desire. And our liturgy reflects that. We say it briefly. But if we slow down, what are we actually saying?

We're saying, oh God, my heart is hungry. My desires run deep. My soul is thirsty. And you know this.

[12 : 12] You made me like this. You made me with these deep desires. And not only did you make me this way, but you know me. You know the deep desires of my heart.

To you all hearts are open. All desires known. It's a prayer of longing. It's a prayer and we're asking God to quench our thirst and to satisfy our souls and worship.

And David understands in this psalm that it's through worship. It's through the ordinary means of word and sacrament and prayer and singing that God has promised to meet with us.

And he has promised to satisfy our hungry and thirsty souls with himself. When is the last time you prayed a prayer like this?

Honestly and freely. Lord, here I am. Here I am in my longing. Here I am in the honest desires of my soul.

[13 : 13] My heart feels like a desert. My heart feels like a desolate place. When's the last time that you poured out your heart to God and you said, Lord, here I am.

In all of my honest desires. Good or bad. And I need you to satisfy me with yourself. That is a prayer.

That is a beautiful prayer that this psalm gives us permission to pray. That's the first prayer that we see in Psalm 63. Lord, here I am in my longing. The second prayer I think that this psalm teaches us to pray is this.

Lord, here I am in my helplessness. Here I am in my helplessness. In the first section of the psalm, we see David looking to God to satisfy his longing. In the second section, we see him clinging to God for help.

And given the story behind the psalm, I think that makes a lot of sense. And in the second section, verses 5 through 11, though, we see him reaching out to God, clinging to God for help with this kind of confident expectation.

[14 : 22] I want you to see what I mean as we look at verses 5 through 11. He says, That sounds like a pretty confident prayer, doesn't it?

But the thing I want to say about David's confident expectation in this prayer is that we shouldn't misunderstand the fact that David was confident.

We shouldn't misunderstand David's confidence to mean that he also wasn't experiencing his own weakness. We see this in a couple ways.

First, look at when David is reaching out to God for help. We see this phrase, in the watches of the night. In the watches of the night. Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner points out that this is a Hebrew phrase that stresses what it feels like.

When time passes slowly by when you are awake in the middle of the night when you should be sleeping. That's the weight of this phrase.

[15 : 55] And if you've ever struggled with insomnia, this makes a lot of sense to you. It's probably not insomnia why David is awake. People are awake. He's awake because people are trying to kill him.

That's something that would make anybody anxious enough not to sleep. But you don't have to be in David's exact situation to appreciate a midnight cry for help.

A midnight cry for help. If you think back to the last time you couldn't sleep. Hopefully it wasn't last night. But if you think back to the last time you couldn't sleep, what was going through your mind?

If you're like anything like me, it was probably things that you were anxious about. Probably things that you were worried about. Probably things that were mostly outside of your control.

It's often in the middle of the night when we can't sleep that we are most aware of our frailty. Our weakness. And our helplessness.

[16 : 58] During the day we can busy ourselves with work and other tasks. They can distract us from things that make us truly anxious. But in the middle of the night there is nothing to be done. Whatever makes us feel useful or helpful during the day is gone.

And we are alone with whatever is in our hearts. Our worries. Our anxieties. Our fears. Our questions. Our doubts.

And so I think a question that the psalm raises for us is how can we pray with confidence? How can we pray with confidence like David in these moments? David's confident expectation in this prayer doesn't mean that he wasn't experiencing his own helplessness.

It means that he knew where to direct it. He knew where to direct it. Look at how he describes his experience of God in verse 7. He describes himself as seeking refuge in the shadow of God's wings.

This is a beautiful powerful image of a baby bird who finds refuge in the wings of its mother. As the mother bird wraps her wings around her young.

[18 : 06] It's a beautiful image of dependence amid weakness. We see the same in verse 8 where David prays, my soul clings to you.

How is David's soul clinging to God? Well, David's soul is clinging to God through this prayer. His soul is clinging to God through prayer amid his own weakness and helplessness.

But notice, notice what makes David's clinging possible. He says, my soul clings to you and your right hand upholds me.

Your right hand upholds me. Why does David pray with such confident expectation? Because his confidence isn't in his grasp of the Lord.

David's confidence is in the Lord's grasp of him. It's not in the strength of his clinging, but in the strength of the Lord's upholding that makes his clinging possible.

[19 : 11] An image that came to mind for me as I was reflecting on this psalm is a child who is reaching out to their mom or dad for help. They're anxious.

They're upset. Tears streaming down their face. Helpless reaching out their arms to their mom or dad. But they're doing all of this at the exact same time that their mom or dad is already holding them in their arms.

How often, how often do parents of young children have to console the one who is already firmly within their grasp?

Friends, this is what the Lord is always doing with us. Psalm 63 and all of the psalms show us that when we reach out to God, we are reaching out to God.

Who is already holding on to us. We are reaching out to God who is already holding on to us.

[20 : 23] And that is why we can pray prayers like this. Lord, here I am. Here I am. Here I am in my weakness. Here I am in my helplessness.

Lord, here I am in my worry. Here I am in my doubt. Here I am in my fear. My questions. Here I am in my lack of control.

My inability to solve. I don't have all the answers, but I don't know what to do. And I don't know where to turn. But turn to you. When's the last time you prayed a prayer like that?

Lord, here I am in my helplessness. For what or for who do you need that prayer in your life right now?

It's not in our strength that we experience God as our refuge, but it's in our weakness. These are two prayers that Psalm 63 teaches us to pray.

[21 : 33] Lord, here I am in my longing. Lord, here I am in my helplessness. And our confidence in praying prayers like this is even further helped by knowing more of the backstory behind the Psalm.

So if we go back to 2 Samuel chapter 15, we see that Absalom and his followers are on their way into the city. As David and his men are on their way out of the city east of Jerusalem.

And as they go out of the city, David tells Zadok, the priest, to carry the Ark of the Covenant back into Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant was the place of God's presence, the place where God's glory dwelled among his people.

And as the Ark heads back into Jerusalem, we read that David heads east out of the city towards the wilderness.

And as he does, he passes through a hill called the Mount of Olives. 2 Samuel 15 verse 30 says this, It's a moving scene.

[22 : 50] You can imagine the different layers to David's weeping. He's weeping over having to flee for his life amid the chaos of his kingdom. He's weeping over his own son, who's currently in rebellion against him and trying to kill him.

He's weeping over having to depart from the Ark of the Covenant, the very symbol of God's presence with his people. And we can only imagine, as we imagine David weeping up the Mount of Olives, we can imagine that this is what eventually leads David to the desolate place that he describes at the beginning of the psalm.

And ultimately, we can pray with the same confidence that David has in this psalm because of who David ultimately points us to.

Centuries later, there would be another Davidic king who would head east out of the city of Jerusalem and who would also climb the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went.

And this other Davidic king would climb the Mount of Olives and not being able to sleep, he would lay awake all night praying on that hillside. Because like David, there were men who were coming to take his life.

[24 : 07] And because like David, he knew that he would be separated from God's presence. And like David, he would pour out his heart to God and he would say, God, here I am in my longing.

And like David, he would say to God, here I am in my helplessness. But God would not quench his thirst and God would not come to his help.

God would not console him and he would not escape those who came to kill him. Instead, Jesus would be left utterly alone and helpless. Before those who would arrest and betray him on the Mount of Olives and who would eventually beat and crucify him.

And friends, we did this. He did this. He did this so that we, like David, could behold his power and glory.

He did this to show you what David knew that his steadfast love for you is better than life.

[25 : 17] That's why he did it. And he did this so you and I can pray Psalm 63 with the same confidence and even greater confidence that David had.

Thursday afternoon, I was just come out of a meeting and I walked out of a coffee shop and I headed towards the metro. And as I walked towards the metro, I noticed that there were dark clouds looming in the sky.

And in that moment, I did what any spiritual person would do. I checked the weather app on my phone and saw the radar. And sure enough, there was a line of thunderstorms just a few miles away coming towards me.

And so I walked as fast as I could towards the metro to try to get on the train before it started the storm. And thankfully, before a few minutes before it got here, before the storms came, a train came and it stopped at the station and the doors opened.

And I walked onto the train and I sat down and I breathed a sigh of relief because I knew that whatever happened, whatever happened next, I knew that I was safe from the rain, from the storm, from the lightning, from the thunder.

[26 : 32] And as the train went through the next few stops on the red line, I could see the dark storm clouds getting closer and closer and closer. I could see the wall of rain.

I could see the flash of lightning. But I knew that even if the storm swept over me, that I was safe. Because the train was my shelter and my refuge and it was eventually carrying me along towards my destination.

And friends, I think prayer is a lot like that. Prayer doesn't keep the storms from coming our way. But it does allow us to experience Jesus as a refuge and as a shelter in the midst of the storm.

When we come to Jesus with our longing, we can have confidence in his promise to satisfy us because he is our bread and he is our living water. And when we come to Jesus with our hopelessness, our weakness, our inadequacy, we can have this amazing confidence that he is already holding on to us because he is our shepherd who will never, ever, ever let us go.

Our confidence in prayer is not in our grasp of Jesus. But in his grasp of us.

[27 : 55] As the Lord of Psalm 63, who upholds us with his right hand. And shelters us in his wings. And satisfies us with his love.

I began earlier with the story of George Matheson who wrote this hymn, this beautiful hymn. A love that will not let me go. And it reminds me, these words remind me a lot of the words of Psalm 63.

Matheson penned these words. O love that will not let me go. I rest my weary soul in thee.

I give thee back the life I owe. That in thine ocean depths, its flow may richer, fuller be.

O light that follows all my way. I yield my flickering torch to thee. My heart restores its borrowed ray.

[29 : 00] That in thy sunshine blaze, its day may brighter and fairer be. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, we thank you that we can come before you with these prayers.

Lord, here we are in our longing. Here we are in our helplessness. And we thank you that as we reach out to you in these prayers, thank you that we can be confident.

That you are already holding on to us. And that you promise to be our refuge. You promise to satisfy us. No matter what situations we're facing in life.

Lord, give us the confidence to pray this prayer. The prayers that King David prayed. And Lord, would we experience you as the shepherd of our souls. And we pray all this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.