

Better Than Life

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[0 : 00] You'll find it a help if you open the Bibles in the seats in front of you at Psalm 63 that Mary read for us a moment ago on page 479.

We've been chasing through the goodness of God in the Psalms and this week's Psalm has the same kind of feel as last week, Psalm 34, where David said, taste and see that the Lord is good because the goodness of God cannot be put into words, it has to be tasted.

And if anything, this Psalm, Psalm 63, is more intense and more intimate and David is in a deeper mess than he was last week, which is a good thing, I think, for any of us who think we're in a bit of a mess.

And his was a self-inflicted mess, which I'll explain in just a moment. And the title on the Psalm, which is part of the biblical text, a Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness in Jerusalem, most commentators agree that he is on the run from his son Absalom, who wants to kill him and take the throne away from him near the end of his life.

And I need to give you some background. King David, Israel, we're about 1000 BC. See, David had reigned for a long time and in his middle age, he completely lost his way and he started to make very bad decisions indeed.

[1 : 29] He had a beautiful neighbour's wife. The neighbour wasn't beautiful. His wife was beautiful and he had sex with the wife. And when she became pregnant, he tried to cover it. And when he couldn't cover it, he had his neighbour murdered.

And though he repented of that sin, David from then on became very strangely passive with the various children he had to his various wives.

And when one of his sons raped the son's half-sister, David did nothing. And David's eldest son, Absalom, was so enraged with this that he arranged the murder of his half-brother.

I know, it sounds, it's a bit like, it's halfway between Shakespeare and the Sopranos. It's, and it gets worse. It's important for us to point out this background because some of us have a view that people in the Bible are kind of stained glass saints.

They're not, they're just like us, we're just like them. What does David do about the murder of his son, the rapist's son? He does absolutely nothing. And so after a while, Absalom begins to deliberately undermine the throne.

[2 : 41] And the description of Absalom is like a, he's like a local town celebrity who's famous for being a celebrity. He's a vain man. The text tells us that he grows his hair long and once a year he has it cut and it even tells us what the weight of his hair is.

So picture Fabio in the ancient Near East and he buys himself a chariot, a Lamborghini chariot and he rides up and down with his horsemen signing autographs and creating discontent and resentment toward the king.

He says, if only I was king. If only I was king, the teachers would get all the money they needed. They would.

That's what he said. And medical care would be free. And hydro and gas would be completely free. And every child would have a laptop and you'd get a property on the water, whatever.

He made all these promises. And after four years of this, he'd won over enough of the royal court that he enacted a coup. And he took an army with him up to another city and he announced himself, he anointed himself king and he marched on Jerusalem to murder his father and take the throne for himself.

[3 : 54] And David heard about it on the day of the march and he and some of his loyal followers had to leave so quickly they went on foot. And as they walked down out of Jerusalem, down toward the desert, down toward the wilderness, they were pelted with rocks and with mud and with all sorts

of other things.

And David had some of his mighty men. These are men of war. And there's this lovely little incident where one of the mighty men says to David, do you want me to go and chop the head off the loudest heckler?

And David says, well, he says this, and I quote, look, he says, my own son seeks my life, how much more this man? Leave him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to.

So they make it all the way down into the wilderness, which has nothing in it. It's absolutely dry. They have nothing, no resources.

They know that when Absalom and the military have finished sacking the city, they're going to come after him and kill them. And David sits down and writes this psalm. And it is the most remarkable outpouring of emotion, affection and devotion.

[5 : 03] And I think we plunge into very, very deep water. And the problem in looking at it in this way is that you just can't dissect this sort of thing, this poetry. You have to savor it.

You have to take it into your heart and mouth and say it and savor it so that it shapes our hearts and our souls. He turns, verse 1, oh God, you are my God.

He turns to God, but we've got to see how he does it, not just in general terms. He does it in a very specific way. He doesn't say, look, he doesn't say to the Lord, I've done all this wrong.

Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry. He doesn't say, help, help, help, help, help, help. No, he builds this psalm around one central reality, which is in verse 3.

And that is the steadfast love of God. And you can see in the first little bit of verse 3, David says, your steadfast love is better than life. Not the best thing in life, but better than life itself.

[6 : 12] This is the central reality in the psalm, because it's the central reality of God himself. And this word, steadfast love, it's just one Hebrew word, and I'd like to give you this Hebrew word to take away with you.

I don't like it when preachers get the congregation to say something, but I want you to say this word. It's spelled H-E-S-E-D in English, hesed. I wonder if you'd just quietly say that.

Hesed. Thank you very much. That's the word to remember. And it depends where you're educated, but the H is not a H, it's a H. I'm not going to do it.

Last week I saw a television program called Top Gear. It's an English car show, which is very funny. And on the program they had this special car that VW, VW had taken a little golf, and they'd put a 12-cylinder twin turbo engine into a little tiny golf, and none of the guys could turn around corners. It would go very fast. I mean, the engine was just way too hard for that tiny, way too big for that tiny little body. And it feels a little bit like that whenever we come across this word hesed, which is translated steadfast love.

[7 : 33] Steadfast love is a bit tame. It does have the connotation of love and kindness and compassion, and it is steadfast because it's eternal.

But it also means a shocking display of pure goodness. A doing hesed, doing steadfast love, is always doing something extraordinary, generous, and unexpected.

Yes, it comes out of mercy, and goodness, and kindness, and love, but it's always exceptional. It's always surprising, and it's completely free. The person who does hesed has no requirement on them to do it.

And when the person does hesed, it's not according to rules. It's not according to customs. In fact, it's often violating rules and customs. Let me give you some examples.

Rahab the prostitute in the city of Jericho when the people of Israel were coming into the land. She believed in God, and so she took the spies who had come into the land, and she hid them from the authorities in Jericho.

[8 : 41] It says in the text that she did hesed to the spies. In other words, what she does is spontaneous. It's quite treacherous. It's against the law in her city.

She would have been regarded as a criminal. Completely voluntary, and very brave, and way beyond the call of duty. It was a surprising act of love and kindness she did hesed.

Same way, earlier on, do you remember Abraham and Sarah? Sarah, the most beautiful woman in the land, and they had to go down to Egypt for a little while, and Abraham was frightened, and so he said, just tell the king of Egypt that you're my sister, not my wife.

And we read in the text that Sarah did it. And even though it was a morally dubious thing to do, it says that Sarah did hesed. It's an extraordinary kindness.

It's exceptional. It's usually meeting a critical need. It's outside the normal run of things, and it arises from personal affection and love, and it always demonstrates itself in pure goodness.

[9 : 48] And you know, some of the Old Testament prophets just loved God's hesed toward them, but hated it when God showed his hesed to their enemies. And the most famous, of course, is Jonah.

And God calls the prophet Jonah and says, I want you to go to the enemies of my people who live in Nineveh and preach judgment to them. And Jonah runs the other direction. Remember this? And after the intervention of a storm and a large fish, Jonah turns up in Nineveh smelling a fish, and he preaches judgment, and the entire city, as one, repents and turns to the Lord, and Jonah is absolutely furious.

And he says, Lord, this is what I said when I was back in my own country. This is why I made haste to run away to Tarshish. For I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in hesed, abounding in steadfast love.

Now, where do you get that idea from? If you would keep your finger in Psalm 63 and turn backwards to Exodus, right near the beginning of the Bible, Exodus chapter 34, please.

[11 : 05] Page 74. We're going to see from this passage that doing hesed is the supreme attribute of God.

God. This is the scene where God reveals his own name to Moses and we are on holy ground as God himself speaks his name to us.

And at the heart of his words is a double reference to hesed. No wonder Moses bows in worship. So, Exodus 34, verse 6. The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in hesed, in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping hesed, steadfast love, for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation and Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshipped.

This is the absolute sublime declaration of who God is by God himself. And you know, as we look at it this morning, it seems like there's a two-sidedness to it, doesn't there? And on the one side we meet a God who is a kind and sensitive God and on the other side he is a passionate avenger of wrong.

Yes, on the one side there's compassion and forgiveness and grace and on the other there's the devouring fire, the jealous God. But undergirding all the other attributes is this, the abundant, overflowing, multiplying, this is what the word means, filling up hesed, steadfast love of God.

[13 : 08] Because hesed is the foundation of God's dealings with us and with his world. And you see, his wrath is temporary.

His wrath is only aroused by evil. But his true heart is hesed. The Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever.

This is the primal reality about God. It's not grounded in any rules and regulations. It's free, it is spontaneous and it shows itself in acts of mercy and love which are just simply astonishing.

The Exodus is one of them. There's nothing outside God that causes his hesed. There's absolutely no justification for his compassion and kindness. And this is what ties into Psalm 63.

And I just, I wish I could spend more time on this but the central wonder of the God of the Bible is that he delights to show hesed. He is more eager to save than he is to judge.

[14 : 12] He delights in showing hesed. He is rich in hesed. He has abundant hesed. So you see, if we go back to Psalm 63, that's what lies behind that little phrase in verse 3.

Your steadfast love is better than life. See, it's in God and his hesed that David wants to gaze.

That's what he longs for because he knows that's the only thing that is really ultimately fulfilling. David knows he's failed and everything is spun out of control but his desire is for this inexhaustible hesed love. And so what he does is this.

He makes three statements in the Psalm and each statement has to do with his soul. And these three statements show God's steadfast love at work and they are three signs that we can take to see if we've tasted the steadfast love of God.

And I want to commend these three soul statements to you this morning as a way of rejoicing in the work of God in your hearts. And the first one comes from the first couple of verses and I'm going to turn them into questions.

[15 : 27] The first one is this. Are you hungering and thirsting for God? David is completely unashamed to confess the strength of his desire and longing and hunger and yearning for God.

Look at verse 1. Oh God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you. My soul, here's the first reference, my soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Are you hungering, are you thirsting after God? Because if you are, it is a mark that God's steadfast love is at work in you now. This is not true of someone who is not a Christian.

If you haven't tasted the goodness and loving kindness of God, you'll have no desire for it. The Bible says that before we're Christians we're basically spiritually content and materially discontent. And after we become Christians, those things reverse. When he reveals his name and his hesed love, when he touches us with his deep, steadfast love, we begin to hunger for it.

[16 : 39] And David's hungry. I mean, it affects his whole body. It gnaws at him physically. It's wonderful because in this self-inflicted mess, he doesn't wallow in his guilt or his shame.

He sets God before his own spiritual eyes, before the eyes of his soul and he says, my soul thirsts for you. And where does it come from, this thirst?

The little word at the beginning of verse 2 is very helpful. He says, so in just the same way I looked on you in the sanctuary beholding your power and glory. In other words, he remembers when he was back in Jerusalem in the temple when he gazed with the eyes of his soul on God and he feasted his eyes on the power and glory of God and the perfect distillation and combination of the power and glory of God of course is his hesed love.

In other words, he's not thirsting because he's been kicked out of Jerusalem. He's not thirsting for God because things are going wrong and the circumstances are difficult. No, no, no. Once you taste God you carry that thirst with you everywhere you go.

He had seen God. He had tasted God and he knows there's nothing that will compare in this life. I like the Canadian author, the Vancouver author Douglas Coupland and many of you have read his things.

[18 : 03] He says that he refuses to become a Christian not because he doesn't think it's true or because he doesn't feel that he needs it, confesses that he does need it. But the reason he won't become a Christian is because it will put him in a straitjacket where he can no longer be curious and inquisitive.

I quote from the old book Gen X, he says somebody who thinks they've found some miracle truth is de facto cattle blind. They've just stopped being curious. That's the scary thing.

With them it's don't question me, don't talk to me because I've got the truth. I can't imagine life without curiosity. When we encounter the God of hesed love it's not the end of curiosity, it's kind of the opposite.

It's the beginning of an eternal desire and a love for God which goes on and on because we want to know God more and more and more. That's why this language of peering and gazing and beholding God is so helpful to us.

David tries to understand the hesed love of God more and more to know him better. When you taste the steadfast love of God you taste something better than life and it makes you hunger and thirst for more.

[19 : 20] And I can't leave this point and I'm spending a lot more time on this first point than the other two. This is different than any other kind of desire. One of the clergy on our team at St. John's subscribes to the very groovy gadget and techie magazine called Wired.

I won't tell you who he is. Suffice to say he has red hair. I hear a voice.

Well it's very kind of him because after three or four months he lends me his second hand copies. And in each issue there is a section called drool worthy.

And these are products that every man must have. And they range from 3D printers to Bugatti Veyrons which is a very expensive car from necessary things like gold plated iPods to million dollar watches.

The problem is that the people I know who have those things find they just they gradually lose their pleasure. You know you can have two million dollar watches you can have two million million dollar watches.

[20 : 31] And they gradually lose their satisfaction. There's the law of diminishing returns and it just leaves you with ennui. It's the same for anything that is not God.

Good things art and fame and success and finance it all brings diminishing returns. There's only one thing that's better than life. That's the hewed love of God.

And life is a brilliant gift from God but to see the face of God to see his steadfast love with the eyes of our soul is better than life. It's better than all the spas and all the gold medals and honours and meals and you know fill in the gaps for yourselves.

And if you're paying attention you might like to know that in verse 3 life is in the plural. steadfast love is better than lives. So the best life you can possibly imagine next to God and his hewed it's nothing.

So here is the first sign. Are you hungering after God? Belonging to God is not just believing correct doctrine. It's not just knowing your sins are forgiven that you have the gift of eternal life.

[21 : 48] it's living fellowship with him it's seeing his love as better than life itself it's hungering for him. That's the first soul statement. Are you hungering for God? Secondly verses 5 to 7 more quickly are you feasting on God?

If you look down at verse 5 the second time David refers to his soul and now that he's placed the steadfast love of God before his eyes he's completely confident that he will be satisfied.

My soul verse 5 will be satisfied as with fat and rich foods and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips. I think what happens is this when we first taste the steadfast love of the Lord his love comes into our hearts our souls and makes them larger.

His love which is a pure love pure goodness it comes in and it gets at all the corners where there's mould and all sorts of things that shouldn't be there and then it gradually makes our hearts larger gives them a greater capacity and nothing else can take its place.

And here is the picture of a feast it's not a snack it's not fast food fabulous satisfaction and contentment a flavourfulness a richness nourishingness umami and for those of us who are watching our calories and our diets don't worry about the fat and rich food the idea is not just pigging out and forgetting your waistline the idea is it's the highest treat and pleasure what is fresh and delightful and fulfilling but here's the amazing thing when will he be satisfied when is David going to be satisfied it's not in heaven that he's talking about here look at verse 6 when I remember you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night for you've been my help and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy yes it's in the dark hours of the night when anxieties rush in and sleep rushes out or is it just me it's in the slow watches of the night when you're trying to sleep and David is practicing here what is known as biblical meditation it's very different than eastern meditation biblical meditation is not emptying your mind or chanting one thing and trying to change your consciousness what it's doing is focusing your heart or your soul on one thing that you've learned about

[24 : 26] God maybe you've read it in the scriptures can be a phrase or an attribute of God something he has revealed and thinking it through and thinking it over and turning it over and bringing it to bear on different areas of your life as God brings his own presence to bear on this I want to be careful about this I'm not talking about going after goosebumps if you go after goosebumps that's just selfish you're not really going after God some years ago I was involved in a very difficult conflict and a lot of it was very personally focused on me and at the most difficult point I was confined to bed with some strange disease and I could not pray I hadn't been able to pray for a while and I tried to pray I tried to pray the Lord's Prayer just wouldn't work I couldn't get any further than the first word of the Lord's Prayer and just a little bit of the second word of the Lord's Prayer so I began to say that first word and the second word and I began to think on them and to meditate on them and to try and apply them to myself and it didn't happen it wasn't quick but over a long period of time

I had a sense on my heart that I was part of the congregation of God's people that I was a participant with the body I wasn't isolated that I was a living part of the body who called God our father and the circumstances stayed the same just as David's circumstances stayed the same but for a few weeks just that first word our fed me and I came to feast on it because we have a father who is God and it was a sign of his undeserving love to me so that is the second question are you hungering for God are you feasting on God and thirdly and finally are you clinging to God and if you're drifting in your concentration let me ask you a question did anyone notice anything different about Terry Fullerton our organist this morning anyone he's not wearing socks are you with me again okay let's come back to the sermon put that out of your minds entirely are you hungering for

God are you feasting on God thirdly and this is the third time he refers to his soul in verse eight are you clinging to God my soul clings to you your right hand upholds me this is a beautiful two-sided verse clinging is like glue it's the word used when a man leaves his father and mother and holds fast cleaves to his wife it's a very intimate word David says I cling to you and on the other side by far the most important side in his steadfast love because he says God has taken hold of me he's grasped and seized me securely in his right hand this is how it works we cling to God because he has taken hold of us this is another sure sign that you've been gripped by the grace of God it's when you grip him you can't grip onto God unless he's got a hold of you this is a true proof that you've tasted the steadfast love of the Lord so if you see a Christian who's clinging onto God even you know with the skin of their teeth you can say to them without any shadow of contradiction that God is holding them these are the three questions for us this morning are you hungering for God are you satisfied feasting on God and are you clinging to God because of course hunger is a hunger and appetite is a it's something you can dull you can eat all the wrong things and you can take the edge off it but I want to finish just by leading you into the New Testament to say that we have more reason than David did to celebrate that the steadfast love of the Lord is better than life because we've seen the steadfast love of God embodied so I want to just flick with you over to Romans for a moment Romans chapter 5 Romans 5 verse 8 very precious verse in verse 6 and 7 it describes how we were without Christ weak ungodly verse 8 God shows his love his steadfast love for us in this that while we were still sinners Christ died for us notice please when does God show his love now when did Christ die for us then past tense in other words if we want to see and know with the eyes of our soul and hunger after the steadfast love of the Lord we look to Christ and when we look to Christ we know this kind of love that stays secure and confident turn over one page to Romans 8 these very familiar words at the end of chapter 8 verse 38 the apostle Paul says I'm sure I'm sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ [30 : 21] Jesus our Lord and he says that based on the death and resurrection of Jesus and because he knows the steadfast love is better than life let's pray together thank you thank you thank you thank you