

God Loves You No Matter What!
Psalm for the Summer – Psalm 63
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A few years back, there was a TV show called “God Friended Me.” It lasted only a couple of seasons, but it was based on an interesting idea. It was about a young man named Miles Finer. Miles lived in New York City where – according to the promotional material – 8.6 million people were searching for meaning and answers to life.

Miles billed himself as a modern-day prophet, someone who spoke truth to the questions people were asking. He produced podcasts to get his message out. The heart of what he was saying, at least at the beginning, went something like this: “There is no proof of God anywhere in the universe, but I will do my best to provide meaning for people wherever life takes them.”

Miles’ dad was a preacher, but somewhere along the way Miles became convinced that God does not exist. It had a lot to do with the death of his mother when he was 8 years old. She’d been diagnosed with breast cancer. Miles hoped and prayed for a miracle, and according to him, he got one. The test results were good. But tragically, his mom was killed in a car accident on the way home from the hospital.

Fast forward a couple of decades. Miles is pretty sure he has things figured out, at least as far as God is concerned. Then out of the blue he gets a friend-request from God on Facebook. Events are set in motion that he can’t explain. He bumps into a stranger on the street and then later he saves the stranger from an oncoming train. Miles still has his share of doubts, but a crack opens up in his carefully constructed world. He begins to wonder if maybe there is some sort of Power beyond us. Gradually Miles moves from a position of “God does not exist” to “Sometimes life’s greatest mysteries can be solved only by a leap of faith.”

Again, this was only a TV show, but you have to admit, unexplainable things do sometimes happen, and we can’t help but wonder why. In Psalm 63 we hear the prayers of someone also struggling with the mysteries of life, not unlike Miles Finer. “You are my God,” the psalmist cries out. “In my heart I long for you, as I would long for a stream in a scorching desert.” The psalmist is thirsty for something beyond himself, but there is scarcely a drop of water to be found.

Psalm 63 was either written or inspired by King David. That's what the inscription tells us at the beginning. It's not hard to imagine David giving voice to this prayer. He spent a lot of time in the hot and dry Judean wilderness, trying to become the leader God wanted him to be. But often he was on the run from his enemies, and to be blunt, he made more than a few bad choices along the way.

Whether the psalmist is David or someone moved by David's story, he's not doubting God's existence so much as he's languishing in a time of spiritual weariness. "God, are you there? You seem so far away. Don't you care about me?"

We've asked questions like these before. They can be triggered by any number of things: the death of a loved one, a life-threatening illness, a struggle with an addiction – either one's own or someone close to us. Deep inside we feel dry and weary, and we agonize over whether God is there and if God cares.

Saint John of the Cross was a sixteenth century poet and mystic. He reflected often on the arid places in our lives. In one of his poems, John referred to those arid places as "the dark night of the soul." He described the "dark night" in a variety of ways, but more than anything it was a place of despair and hopelessness where God seemed absent.

For Saint John of the Cross, and for the psalmist in Psalm 63, the dark night of the soul is like a desert. It's the place where people feel thirsty. Notice how the psalmist describes his experience: "Lord, I have seen your power and glory in the place of worship." But note that the psalmist is saying this in the past tense. All he can do now is try to remember what the good times were like.

We can't really blame him. So often when we're dried up, we don't engage in worship. We don't join with others. We turn inward. But ultimately that's not what the psalmist does. He somehow finds words to pray, whether he feels like it or not.

Next the psalmist shares a vow of trust. "Lord, your love means more than life to me, and I will praise you. As long as I live, I will pray to you." The Hebrew word for "love" in this psalm is *hesed*. It's best translated as "steadfast love." It's like *agape* in the New Testament. It's a love that comes from God and is

freely given. It's the highest and best gift possible. As with John 3:16, it's a love that keeps on loving us no matter what!

Lord, your love means more than life to me. I will pray to you as long as I live. This is a remarkable vow, whether in the ancient world or today. Today we're surrounded by the Mayo Clinic and its various satellites. People come here from all over the world. And why? For health and wellness and a good long life. The vast majority of those who come want to live as long as possible.

The psalmist turns this thinking upside down: "God, your steadfast love is better than life itself. If I don't have that love," he's claiming, "then I don't have anything."

Psalm 63 is telling us that whether or not we always feel God's love, and whether or not we always *feel* lovable, the steadfast love of God is what makes life truly worthwhile. We are God's idea of some great children. And that's never going to change.

Lord, your love means more than life to me. It's a powerful comment, especially when you're dry and weary, and hope is in short supply. Think Israel and Hamas; Ukraine and Russia; a presidential election in the United States that's sucking the life right out of us.

Donald Trump survived an assassination attempt. We're grateful for that, and relieved. He pledged unity, as did politicians and preachers throughout the country. "Such violence has no place in American life," they claimed. But the unity has been short-lived. The name-calling and nastiness soon returned. In the midst of our hyper-partisanship, it didn't take long to feel like God is far away and we don't have a prayer in the world.

So, what does the psalmist do about his dry and weary world? While lying on his bed at night, he remembers the past. But instead of fixating on his problems, instead of tossing and turning for hours on end, he prays: "I think about you, God, before I go to sleep, and my thoughts turn to you during the night."

I find that encouraging. The psalmist focuses on God's help and strength, even when evidence points to the contrary. He prays: "You have helped me, and I sing happy songs in the shadow of your wings. I stay close to you, and your powerful arm supports me."

A while ago I was listening to an episode of Fresh Air on MPR. Professor Matthew Walker was talking about sleep. Walker has a book entitled *Why We Sleep*. During the interview, he discussed the lack of sleep in our society. It's an epidemic. And it's leading to some serious problems.

Walker had a couple of suggestions for those who want more sleep. One of them sounded familiar: If you wake up in the middle of the night, it's best to get out of bed, move to a chair, and find something to read until your body is tired again. And no, don't read your cell phone!

Another suggestion was not as familiar. It came from research on the positive effects of meditation. Instead of getting out of bed, said Walker, why not stay under the covers and focus your mind on something positive and life-giving? To that I might have added what the psalmist was saying, "Lord, you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy."

Psalm 63 is a call to trust that God *will* come to us. Whether we're stuck in a hot and dry wilderness, or enduring our own dark night of the soul, God *will* eventually come, and life *will* feel different. The main thing is to trust that God cares enough to show up for you and me.

Miles Finer might be right: there is no hard and fast proof of God anywhere in the universe. But that's not the last word. Indeed, "sometimes life's greatest mysteries can be solved only by a leap of faith."

So, along with the psalmist, we keep our eyes and ears open, and we look for possibilities that might explain the unexplainable. God may show up at just the right time. And if so, he will come with the assurance that his steadfast love is better than life.

Friends, there is nothing you could ever do – as good as it may be – to make God love you any more than he already does. And there is nothing you could ever do – as bad as it may seem – to make God love you any less. God's steadfast love *is* better than life itself, that's what the psalmist tells us, and that's the last word for us. No doubt, you are God's idea of some really great children. And God is going to keep loving you no matter what! Amen