

bored. Let this psalm challenge you to reach out to the greater things your Lord would give you.

- Pray for those who find it hard to open themselves up to God and to other people, and therefore find themselves trapped in life with few places to go except to repeat the things they have always done. Pray for them, and where possible, help them.

Final Prayer

Almighty God, You use the most meagre of our offerings, and the most extravagant. In Your Kingdom You do not have comparative measures, but You value everything according to its heavenly purpose. Use the gift of our lives according to the purposes for which You have created us; and liberate us in Your service, we pray. AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You came into this world in obedience to the Father and in total commitment to those You came to save. Break through the problems of sin and wickedness that dominate our secular world, and come into our lives this very day. Assure us of the forgiveness of our sins when we turn to you for help and give us strength to live according to what we know is right and true, so that we may enter the presence of God with joy and thanksgiving. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray for the families of those who work in the fire service, and who know that their loved ones face danger in their work. Pray for those who have lost relatives in the fire services.

On-going prayers

- Pray for those suffering with cholera in southern Africa
- Pray for all those whose prospects are bleak this Christmas
- Thank God for the joys of preparing for Christmas

Meditation

Save Your people O Lord:

Bring to light what is useless, ineffective and irrelevant within us
And replace it with purpose, power and vitality.

Uncover what is rotten, broken, and diseased within us
And work within us to heal, mend, and make whole again.

Reveal the prejudice, insecurity and intolerance within us
And redirect our hearts to be open, secure and free.

Expose the unease, rebellion and un-forgiveness within us
And enlighten us with Your salvation, justice and love.

Root out the complacency, presumption and conceit within us
And restore Your authority, Your power and Your Glory.

Save Your people, O Lord.

Bible Study - Psalm 61

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. Of David

¹ Hear my cry, O God;
Attend to my prayer.

² From the ends of the earth I call to
you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
Lead me to the rock that is higher
than I,

³ for you have been my refuge,

⁴ a strong tower against the enemy.
Let me live in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of
your wings!

Selah

⁵ For you have heard my vows, O God;
you have given me the inheritance
of those who fear your name.

⁶ Increase the days of the king's life,

may his years continue for generations.

⁷ *May he be live in God's presence forever;*

Assign faithful love and truth to preserve him.

⁸ *Then I will always sing praise to your name and fulfil my vows day after day.*

Review

This Psalm contains some wonderful lines that have for centuries been an inspiration. 'Lead me to the rock that is higher than I' (61:2) is a powerful spiritual phrase which expresses the heart's desire to be taken beyond the troubles of present day experience to better things, and the idea of a 'refuge in the shelter of your wings' (61:4) conveys a deep human need for succour from the living God. If we read the whole psalm, however, it is not easy to put together all that it says. In verses 6 and 7 the psalm changes from speaking personally (using 'I' and 'me') to speaking about 'the king' (using 'he' and 'his'), and this makes it hard to follow exactly what is being said. Clearly, the one praying at the beginning is asking for the Lord's help, and clearly, the prayer concludes with a brief but joyful expression of praise. But what does it all really mean?

A psalm said by King David? There are many theories about this psalm, but the best way to gain a good perspective on it is to imagine that this psalm is said by a king of Israel personally, such as David. The 'superscription' (the few words at the beginning) indicates that the psalm comes from some collection belonging to David. If we imagine David speaking firstly at some difficult or troubled time of his life, then the beginning of the prayer makes sense, with David asking the Lord to help him by lifting his spirits higher above the worldly realms of problems, difficulties and evil (see 'the enemy' – 61:3). David's deepest desire is to live in God's presence (61:4) and take refuge in his Lord, because he is conscious of his duties as a king to bear the inheritance of God's covenant with His people (61:5).

At this point, the psalm changes, and in verses 5 and 6, we can imagine David speaking to God using a formal prayer or liturgy, asking God to lengthen his life and keep him secure in God's presence throughout his days; this picture helps us understand why David might have spoken in the 'third person' (see above) for these two verses. An alternative explanation of this change of language is that David (or some other king) may have said these prayers in the Temple, accompanied by a choir which sang a refrain in verses 6 and 7 asking for the Lord to protect the king. We cannot know exactly what the origins of this psalm were of course, but by considering these scenarios, we enter into the spirit of the psalm and this helps us as we seek to understand its spiritual significance.

Connecting with the Psalm If one or other of these explanations is true (and personally, I prefer the first because it seems more natural), we are still left with the question 'what does this mean for us?' The question is particularly acute because so far, this psalm appears to be all about David, and we could spend the rest of our study time trying to work out which of the many difficult situations David faced may have led to such a psalm. We will not do this, but instead follow the spiritual leads which are given to us to help us find a link both with Jesus Christ, and ourselves.

It would be wrong of us to think that a psalm said by a king was not also important for the ancient people of Israel. The life of the people was wrapped up with the life of the king, and the people of Israel thought of their spiritual inheritance as being bound up with that of the king. It is perhaps for this reason that verses 6 and 7 sound like people joining in with David's prayer. But far more than that, if David was in trouble and needing to be spiritually helped by God, then the people also saw that they needed the same spiritual help. David asked to be led higher (61:2), to as rock 'higher than I', and in so doing expressed not only

his own need but also the needs of the people, perhaps of you and me as well. He also expressed the desires of all God's people to 'live in Your tent forever' (61:4), enjoying God's protection, and therefore able to sing praises to God under all circumstances, and be victorious over the enemy (61:3).

A prayer of salvation As with so many Psalms, there is a short step between talking about David and the people of Israel, and talking about Christ and the life of God's people today. By reading this psalm as a reflection of the path Jesus took for our salvation, then we can see within it the journey of discipleship and faith we must take in order to enjoy the spiritual protection and salvation God promises us in Christ.

Jesus came into the world and lived as we do, but was always being drawn higher, for God was calling Him to fulfil the work of redemption for the sins of all people on the Cross. As Jesus faced this work in the days before He was killed, He called out to God to help Him (see Matt 26:37f.). As He was crucified and killed, and then risen and ascended, Jesus was indeed taken 'higher'; He did in truth defeat the enemy (61:3) and lives forever in God's presence! In travelling this path from the sinful life of earth to the throne rooms of heaven by the grace of God, Jesus paved the way for us to follow Him, for which we are supremely grateful. We, through Jesus Christ, have a spiritual route to follow which takes us out of our earthly troubles and into the presence of God's grace.

Of course, this is a source of great joy for all who know that it is not some religious dream, but a reality which transforms lives (61:8). At this Christmas time, we are grateful that Jesus came into the world principally to walk this very path for us, and it is a path we understand because millions of people throughout the world have asked God to take them to a place that is 'higher than I'. They aspire to the things of God as found in Jesus Christ.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you think that the explanation of this psalm given here is helpful or adequate.
2. When you say 'lead me to a rock that is higher than I', what do you mean? To what do you aspire, spiritually?
3. If you look ahead to what it must be like to praise God for ever, what do you think about? What is it like?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The explanation I have given of this psalm may appear to some to be simple to the point of triviality, but there is no triviality in salvation. Rather, we should marvel that the path of salvation is one that comes from the straightforward spiritual aspirations of God's people being met by the heart of God to lift us higher and take us to a place of praise in His presence. The Psalms often bridge the gap between the Old and the New Testaments because they come out of the real life experiences of God's people and also aspire to the things of God, so it is only to be expected that we will find they speak to us of Jesus Christ, who fulfilled what God required of Him so that we may be saved.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Ask yourself this Christmas time whether you are aspiring to higher things. It may be that life is so hard you feel you can barely keep your head above water, or it may be that you long for more to happen because you are spiritually lonely or*