
God Alone

Psalm 62

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 5, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

God alone. At the beginning of creation, the Triune God was before all other things. Into the silence, God spoke creating the heavens and the earth. And on that day, according to the second chapter of Genesis, God gathered together dust and breathed life into the dirt, creating a living soul, a living being, a human. This human was dependent on God from the beginning for life and breath. To be a living soul—to be a human being—from the very beginning meant to wait on, to rest and trust in God alone. The account in Genesis chapter 2 calls this first human a living soul – *l'nephesh ha'yah*. *Nephesh*—the Hebrew word so often translated soul—signifies from the beginning a neediness, a dependence, a longing that finds its satisfaction, its rest in God alone.¹ Our Hebrew ancestors of faith recognized that the life or soul of a human is like a parched throat longing for water or a windpipe desperate for air: a thing in need. To be human, they understood meant to have the essence of your humanity always seeking, desiring, and needing the life that comes only from God.

Only for God, in rest (is) my soul—my *nephesh*—my life. Or as the NRSV says, “For God alone my soul—my *nephesh*—waits in silence.” Knowing the truth of God alone, the psalmist speaks words of deep trust in God and God’s steadfast presence, protection, and provision. Repeatedly through Psalm 62 the writer emphasizes this “only,” this “alone,” this truth that is none other than God. When it comes to trusting, when it comes to finding our hope and our salvation, the psalmist recognizes and emphatically declares that there is none other than God—the One who is the first and the last. According to the psalmist, trust in God provides an unwavering, unshaking, solid ground for the many contexts of life. Trust is the given because God alone is. In this psalm, the writer speaks not about finding a way to trust in the midst of life’s trials, but rather of having trials in the midst of trust.

With the baseline of trust in God, the psalmist and those who follow in his faith can look at oppressors and hardships of all kinds and say, “How long will you assault me?” (NIV). “How long will you batter your victim?” (NRSV). Because of God, the truth of harm done and pain caused can be spoken, even directly to the ones who are the offenders. Though the psalm writer finds rest in God, he is not passive in his trust in God. Rather the trust and assurance of God as the rock and refuge gives the writer courage to speak out against those at work for destruction. So when oppressors, abusers, and enemies delight in deceit and bless with their mouths yet pursue harm, the psalmist speaks the truth of their wrongdoing. And in doing this, he provides an example for others to do the same. Then he recalls again, almost instructing himself, “Indeed, only in God find rest, my soul, for my hope is from God.” Those who seem to pleasure in the harm of others are not in the end the strong places of refuge, nor the hope providers, nor the saviors because “power belongs to God, and steadfast love is the Lord’s” (vv. 11-12).

Haven’t we been hearing the cries of “How long” all around us these days? How long will this virus last? How long will our lives be disrupted? How long will we live in this fear? How long will we be without work? Or even more devastatingly: How long will the racial disparities continue? How long will Black men and women continue to cry out “I can’t breathe”? How long will

¹ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Sigler Press: Mifflintown, PA, 1974), 10-25.

businesses, organizations, and even churches proclaim Black Lives Matter with their social media accounts but change little about how they operate? The psalmist's response to these cries is God alone is the hope, salvation, rock, and refuge. But this is not merely spiritual salve—this is as physical as breathing, eating, and drinking, which is the very work of the living soul. Finding one's end in God alone, finding rest in God alone, finding the end of one's striving in God alone—this is no passive activity for any who long for their own rest or who seek rest for others. Trust is always active—like the work of breathing—and is stabilized by the rock of God's power and steadfast love.

God alone. In the context of trial and trouble that persists for who knows how long, God alone. It was the early '80's. The 1880's. And Louisa Stead's small family decided to visit the sound for a picnic. They were enjoying their lunch when they heard the cries of a young boy who was struggling in the water. Mr. Stead rushed to rescue the boy. But as any who live close enough to the ocean to hear regularly the coastal news know, so often the rescuer becomes the victim. Both Mr. Stead and the boy drowned with Louisa and her daughter Lily watching. This tragedy profoundly shaped Louisa and Lily's lives. All the uncertainties, all of the wonderings why, all the grief and lament, all of the "how long" questions, all the desperation that accompanies such a devastating loss—this was all part of Louisa's life following her husband's death. Yet in her loss, in her wrestling with God about why such a thing happens, Louisa found an assurance, a steadfast hope and trust in Jesus. At some point in the aftermath of her loss, Louisa found the courage to pen the words that have become a beloved hymn:²

(Verse 1) 'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
Just to take Him at His word;
Just to rest upon His promise;
Just to know, Thus saith the Lord.

(Refrain) Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him,
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er,
Jesus, Jesus, Precious Jesus!
O for grace to trust Him more.

(Verse 4) I'm so glad I learned to trust Thee,
Precious Jesus, Savior, Friend,
And I know that Thou art with me,
Wilt be with me to the end.

When there was no other rock to stand on, no other hope to be found, no other refuge or fortress or salvation, Louisa remembered Jesus. When all the forces of death took their best shot at destroying Louisa's life, she turned to Jesus with her throat parched, her soul desiring, her life needing the breath of God. It's like the truth of trust that the psalmist proclaimed before her became the lyrics of her life. God, in the person of Jesus, alone.

For God alone my soul waits.

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-tis-so-sweet-to-trust-in-jesus>

The psalm writer knows that while trials persist in the context of trust, they are not the only challenge—and likely they are not the most detrimental challenge—to trusting God alone. More likely to draw our longing and desiring self—our souls—away from God is the act of placing our trust on some other thing. A tremendous test of trust comes when we seek to find our soul’s rest in something other than God. The psalmist highlights a few things in particular. His list is not exhaustive, but it is significant in what it includes. First, he lifts people’s life status as a temptation to place one’s trust in the wrong thing. “Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion” (9). The writer realizes that both high and low status can get in the way of trusting God alone. Perhaps it is easier to trust in what’s around, the life one has known, the ways of addressing challenge and hardship common to people of a similar lot in life. Perhaps those methods of coping with the deep longings common to being human that our parents or peers have provided or we’ve produced ourselves are not all that trustworthy. Perhaps our regular ways of dealing with challenges in life are not all that steadfast and strong. And when compared with the rock that is God, they are less than a breath. I know what I so easily turn to, and I suspect you know what you do, too. But ultimately, these weightless things won’t provide the life-breath and rest for which our souls long.

Beyond our status and the status of others in whom we might put our trust, the psalmist points to another common place where we so often and easily turn to find hope, refuge, and salvation other than God alone. “Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them” (10). I’m glad the Psalm writer brings up the topic of money because I don’t want to be responsible for it, especially in a world where finances are uncertain for so many and those with wealth seem to operate by a different rulebook than the rest of the world. Everyone knows, anyway, it’s impolite to talk about money and politics (which often are just different sides of the same coin)—but I’m just following the scripture’s lead this morning. The scriptural writer challenges the people, challenges us, not to put our confidence, our trust, our hope in riches. Of course, we all know the wanton gain of wealth—through coercion, extortion, robbery, or any other unjust practice—is surely no security, no rock to rest on. Yet, the psalmist’s warning goes beyond the crooked accrual of capital. The Message paraphrase of the Bible puts it this way, “And a windfall, if it comes—don’t make too much of it.” Don’t set your heart and hopes on something like riches that are not “granite-strength,” “solid rock under [your] feet, breathing room for [your] soul, an impregnable castle”—which is to say, don’t place your trust on anything that is not God.

Perhaps this morning the psalmist’s instruction to trust might sound overly preachy and too spiritual. Maybe we’ve been admonished by too many preachers or well-meaning sisters and brothers just to trust Jesus when what we needed was a meal to eat or money to pay rent. Or maybe because we’ve misunderstood the soul for some spiritual thing disconnected from the realities of our bodies, we can’t help but think the psalmist’s instruction to trust ignores the realities of life. But Psalm 62 concludes with the psalm writer saying God has spoken once, and twice he has heard it: Power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to the Lord. The psalm concludes with this just when we may be thinking, “Easy for you to say, Mr. Psalm Writer. Easy for you to say that, ‘Those with power and those with none at all are collectively nothing. Oh, and don’t count on riches to provide what you need. Trust in God.’” The psalm concludes reminding us not once but hearing it twice of God’s covenantal, steadfast love: of God’s *hesed*. God’s *hesed*—God’s steadfast and unfailing love—provided water from the rock and rained bread from heaven as God’s people

journeyed toward freedom in the wilderness. God's *hesed*—God's steadfast and unfailing love—guided the people into the Promised Land and did not abandon them when their unfaithfulness led them to exile. God's *hesed*—God's steadfast and unfailing love—came fully in the person of Jesus, God with us, to feed and touch and heal and ultimately to die and be raised again to break the chains of death and the powers of evil for good. Because of God's *hesed*—God's steadfast and unfailing love—Jesus is our rock and salvation. On Christ our souls, our very lives, find their rest. "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord." Trust in God alone. Rest in Christ alone. And when we know this rest, we surely will say, "Tis, so sweet." Amen.