

The Gospel According to the Psalms

Psalm 61 – When My Heart Is Overwhelmed

Faith Church of Linden

By Daniel Patz on August 2, 2026

Introduction: Three Heavy Things

We are back to the Psalms for a few weeks - Psalm 61 – My heart has been overwhelmed and faint over the past 3 weeks.

First, a distant and distinct memory. I first remember this psalm my first year of college, around 1994. The trial that overwhelmed me then looks small compared to the last thirty years — I was heartbroken over a relationship with a girl. But it was one of the first times I remember taking Scripture and using it to meditate and to pray. I remember pacing and quoting it over and over — verse 2 of this Psalm *"from the ends of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I"* (KJV) — lifting my broken heart up to the Lord, saying it again and again.

Second, the heavy burdens carried into this room this morning. I know that this Sunday, like almost every Sunday, there are hearts here that are overwhelmed and fainting. We are praying for parents in the hospital, for a dear brother who had open-heart surgery, for a mother who passed away this week — we had her funeral yesterday. And that is only what is spoken. There are the unspoken burdens you carry: relationships, finances, job struggles, trouble with a parent or a child. Or many inward pressures that you face overwhelming. You.

Third, a heavy season of my own. For me this text comes in need, and as a balm, on the heels of a very heavy season. I was supposed to be in Africa these last two weeks; God had different plans. My dad died. On the Sunday I last preached here, we went missing and was lost for about a week in the lake on our property in Wisconsin. My heart is filled with grace and yet sometimes faint. Through all of it God continued to hold on to us — and He has led us to a rock that is higher than we are.

This song is for the overwhelmed. It is for you and me

The Text — Psalm 61 (ESV) *To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. Of David.*

1 Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; **2** from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, **3** for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the

enemy. **4** Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!

Selah 5 For you, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. **6** Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations! **7** May he be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him! **8** So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day.

How We Read This Psalm

It is wise for us, as we come to these psalms, to first meditate line by line — as far as we are able — on what it meant for the *author* to write it. What did David mean when he wrote this? From there we move to contemplating how these were the prayers and praises of **Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment** of this psalm.

The Psalms are meant to be fulfilled in Christ. Jesus was the only perfect man, the only one who feared the Lord perfectly and lived out righteousness. It is no stretch to hear Jesus praying this psalm in His humanity, as He took on obedience to the Father in order to bring salvation to the world.

And from there, we who have received Christ can gladly take up these prayers and make them our own — knowing that Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises, and the assurance that God's steadfast love is for us, including His protection, His presence, and all His promises to His people.

How the Psalm Divides

Scholars divide this psalm in different ways. You can see a pattern of **prayer, then confidence — at least twice over**:

- Prayers for protection in **vv. 1–2** and again in **vv. 6–7**
- Expressions of confidence in **vv. 3–5** and in **v. 8**

Another way to divide it is right down the middle, at the word **Selah**:

- **vv. 1–4 — "Hear my cry"** (lament for a fainting heart and the need for protection)
- **vv. 5–8 — "You have heard my vows"** (confident prayers in God's promises)

Part One — What David Prays: 4 Things We See in the Text

Here the psalmist prays — and by the end he is committing to praise. We see longing and confidence together. We see pain and despair breaking free into hope and praise. Four things stand out: a cry for God's **protection**, a longing for God's **presence**, a confidence in God's **promises**, and a commitment to God's **praise**.

1. A Cry for God's Protection

"Hear my cry...Listen to my prayer..."

See it vividly, especially in the first half. "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (v. 2). "You have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy" (v. 3). This is a man crying out to be lifted to safety he cannot reach on his own — the rock is *higher than he is*. He runs to God as fortress and stronghold against the enemy.

To be led to the rock that is higher than I is to be lifted up above all my enemies — made invincible, safe as long as God desires to keep me. I think of Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way..."

We should be able to hear **our Savior Crying this** — Hebrews 5:7 — how He prayed. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence." In 1 Peter 2:23 — "when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

Oh, we can pray this as well — "lift me out of danger, God — to the Rock!"

2. A Longing for God's Presence

You hear it in verse 4: "Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!" This is more than rescue — it is a longing for *fellowship with God*, to be permanently in His presence. It is the same heartbeat found across the Psalms:

- Psalm 27:4 — "One thing have I asked... that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life."
- Psalm 84:1–2 — "How lovely is your dwelling place... My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD."

And the promise underneath it all — that God will never leave or forsake His own — is vital:

- Hebrews 13:5 — "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

3. A Confidence in God's Promises

He knows God has heard his vows and given him "the heritage of those who fear your name" (v. 5). To fear God's name is to be one whose heart is *wholly* His. God promised His people — and the king — a heritage in the land. For us that land is a picture of the greater inheritance God gives His own: we receive it now as members of His church, with all His blessings and the presence of the Spirit in our lives, and we will receive it in full as the promise of eternal life with Him. David could declare this because God had promised him a kingship, a people, and a land.

So he prays accordingly in verses 6–7. "Prolong the life of the King; may his years endure to all generations...Maye He be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!" Here I take David to be praying about *himself* in the third person — asking God to preserve the life of the king for the good of Israel. God had promised in **2 Samuel 7** that his kingship would be enthroned forever before God, and this prayer is a plea for God to keep His covenant promise to His people. "your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me..." (7:16)

For many years that kingship looked cut off — through rebellion, exile, and captivity. But God always keeps His promises. He sent His Messiah, the Son of David, to truly be enthroned forever:

- Luke 1:32–33 — Gabriel to Mary: "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David... and of his kingdom there will be no end." (And Mary's own song, the Magnificat, Luke 1:54–55, rejoices that God has kept His promise to His people forever.)

God keeps His promise and blesses the King — and the blessing of the King brings blessing to all of God's people.

4. A Commitment to the Praise of God

He made vows in the midst of his desperate cry, and he will fulfill them (v. 8) — "So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day by day." What is a vow? It is the expression of the one who cries out in trouble and makes promises to God in devotion to Him: *Lord, I am Yours, and I will be Yours forever; be glorified by rescuing me*. This is not striking a bargain with God — it is one of the ways God's people cry out in desperation. And here is a mark of true faith: when God answers, they do not turn away from their vows, because their heart was set on *Him* and not merely on the deliverance.

So he is committed to the Lord, and he *will* praise Him. It is as though he anticipates God's deliverance and begins praising now, before it arrives.

Part Two — How We Live It: 4 Truths for Overwhelmed Hearts

Let us apply this song with these truths ringing in our hearts.

1. Expect the Overwhelmed Heart

We should not be surprised when our hearts are overwhelmed. I think of 2 Corinthians 1, where Paul says he was so utterly burdened that he despaired of life itself — "For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. (9) Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Cor. 1:8–9).

This passage uses the language "**from the end of the earth**" and "**my heart is faint** (overwhelmed)." We do not know the particulars of David's troubles, but we know the effect of his troubles — and it is on the heart. The word "faint" is "overwhelmed" in the King James Version. It carries the idea of being so wearied by pressures, so bowed low by the sorrow of sins, so empty and close to death, that a person does not know how they can last or go on any longer. And "from the end of the earth" is a metaphor for despair, alienation, and spiritual distance from the Lord.

And our Lord Jesus Christ knew this ground Himself. His heart could have been overwhelmed as men rejected Him. He felt firsthand the pain of hunger in the wilderness, yet trusted in the Lord and stood against the wiles of the devil. He faced the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and eventually the Romans and Pilate — and through it all He cried out to the Lord who heard His cries. He lifted up His soul to God. In Gethsemane He was sorrowful to the point of death, and on the cross He was forsaken for us. He is the one man who prayed this psalm perfectly from the true end of the earth — and He was heard (Hebrews 5:7). So when you are overwhelmed, you are not praying alone, and you are not praying to a God who does not understand.

So do not despair if your heart is overwhelmed. This is no sign that you are not His child. Sometimes we will not understand why it is this way — but you are not alone, and God will someday wipe away all your tears. Be encouraged: this song is for you.

*A note I have read over and over again in low and dark moments of ministry. God has used it again and again, from Spurgeon's **Lectures to My Students**, in the chapter "The Minister's Fainting Fits":*

"The lesson of wisdom is, be not dismayed by soul-trouble. Count it no strange thing, but a part of ordinary ministerial experience. Should the power of depression be more than ordinary, think not that all is over with your usefulness... Cast the burden of the present, along with the sin of the past and the fear of the future, upon the Lord, who forsaketh not his saints. Live by the day—ay, by the hour. Put no trust in frames and feelings. Care more for a grain of faith than a ton of excitement... Be content to be nothing, for that is what you are... Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light: faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide. Between this and heaven there may be rougher weather yet, but it is all provided for by our covenant Head... Come fair or come foul, [let us fight on] when we cannot see the face of our God, to trust under the shadow of his wings."

Let us love each other well when we are overwhelmed. Let us hold on to each other and be patient and prayerful for one another.

2. Cry to the God Who Hears

Like so many psalms, this one reminds us that when our hearts are faint, we go to Him in prayer. We take it to Jesus. Our Father cares about all our cares and woes, and He wants us to bring them all to Him – asking, seek, and knocking know that "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11; cf. Luke 11:13).

Be honest about where we run instead. When we are overwhelmed we far too often reach first for medicine, food, entertainment, a self-help book, alcohol, or some other distraction. Some of these are good gifts, and we should thank God for them — but they must never take the place of our primary refuge. We need the God of this song. We need the rock that is higher than I. We need Him to be a strong tower against the enemy. We need His protection, presence, and promises.

He hears. He listens. He knows. And He gives His steadfast love.

- Psalm 34:6 — "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles."
- Psalm 34:17 — "When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears."
- Psalm 40:1–2 — "He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit... and set my feet upon a rock."
- Psalm 55:22 — "Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you."

3. Rest in the All-Sufficient Father

We call on God as our Father, and this Father is all-sufficient in His protection. He is a refuge and He is a strength. His arms are the arms we run under; His wings are a shadow against all evil. He is never far, and He is always with His children — even when it does not feel like it. His promises are precious, and they are numerous. His steadfast love toward His children means that everything works for our good (Romans 8:28); not one hair falls from our head apart from the Father's will (Matthew 10:29–30; Luke 12:7). He works all things for our eternal joy.

He promises to be with us in the stormy seasons and to walk with us through the rivers that will not overflow us:

- Isaiah 43:2 — "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."
- Isaiah 41:10 — "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Do we know this God? Have we come to know His name? This passage *ends* with praise to His name — praise to His character, to who He really is. Is His name written upon our hearts?

And how do we know the Father is this generous toward us? Look at what He has already done: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). Every blessing of this all-sufficient Father comes to us through one Mediator.

4. Receive All in Christ

We receive these blessings through our Mediator, Jesus Christ — the Prophet, Priest, and King who **mediates** all the Father's blessings to us. He is the King who will reign forevermore. He is the King who purchased our pardon, and the Priest who paid for our sins with his own blood. We would be left in darkness with no truth if He were not our Prophet, bringing us words of life. This psalm, and every psalm, is revelation to a soul that would be empty and dead apart from the living work of Christ — who gives us His Holy Spirit and His salvation.

Jesus is our covenant Head. He died on the cross and rose from the dead, to give refuge for the overwhelmed. This psalm is for those who are in Christ Jesus. This psalm is for those who hold on to Christ and pray it. He is our priest and king forever.

He is the Rock that is higher than I. This is the One whom our Father has sent — a stumbling block to those who reject Him in their swollen pride, but to those who fall on their knees and receive Him, the source of eternal salvation, including the very protection and presence we see in this psalm.

Whatever season you are in — young and anxious about the future, worn down by raising a family, or facing the fears of your final years — heart broken by the loss of dad, grandpa, mom, or friend - when darkness veils His lovely face, the answer is the same: rest on His unchanging grace, run toward this God in prayer, and let Christ be your rock. In every high and stormy gale, when all around your soul gives way, may we all learn to praise Him in good times and bad, trusting the anchor will hold as we come to know His name for ourselves.

A Word to the One Not Yet in Christ

Let me speak plainly to anyone here who is not yet in Christ. Everything I have described this morning — the refuge, the strong tower, the shelter of His wings, the presence and promises that hold in the storm — **belongs to those who are in Christ**. I cannot hand you these comforts as if they were yours. But I can offer you Christ Himself, and in Him, all of it.

Understand your real trouble. It is not your difficult circumstances but your sin before a holy God, and a coming judgment you cannot outrun or escape. The rock of safety is higher than you; you cannot reach it or lift yourself to it. You must be led there. So God sent His Son — and **the wonder is that the Rock higher than you first came lower than you**. Jesus went to the true end of the earth, forsaken and overwhelmed under the wrath your sin deserved, so that you would never be cast off. He died for sinners, rose again, and reigns.

Today He is offered to you. Turn from your sin and come — stop trying to cleanse yourself or climb your own way to the safe refuge. Come to the One bore the wrath for us and makes us children of God. Do not wait for a better day or a stronger heart. Come overwhelmed, come empty, come now — and be led to the Rock that is higher than you.

Conclusion

V 2 – “When my heart is faint/overwhelmed — from the end of the earth, faint, bowed low — where do I go, and what do I do? We sing:

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.