

# Journey of a Soul

Psalm 63:1-8

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin with a question for you, on this third Sunday of Lent: **How is it with your soul?**

I'm not sure what your first reaction to a question like that is. Perhaps you think, "Well, that's a little personal! My soul is none of your business, thank you very much!"

Or, perhaps you would love a chance to talk about this question! In a culture increasingly defined by isolation and loneliness, many people are desperate for someone to talk to about the deep questions of life.

Maybe it brings back memories of a bygone age when people would actually *ask* this question.

It's a question whose origins can be traced back to the founder of Methodism John Wesley back in the 1700's. The early Methodists, not unlike some early Mennonites, could be relentlessly focused on the current state of their relationship with God.

It wouldn't be uncommon to begin small group meetings with questions like, "How is it with your soul?" or "How does your soul prosper?" or "How is your spiritual life?"

Or, perhaps you simply have no idea how you would answer a question like that. I suspect this would be the most common response.

We are unaccustomed to talking about our "souls." We're not even sure what a "soul" is or how we might evaluate it.

Is it a reflection of how strong or confident our faith *feels*? Is it the absence of doubt? A certain level of confidence in our postmortem destination?

Is it like a taking of our emotional temperature when it comes to worship, devotion, and piety? Is it a way of measuring the depth of our commitment or a test to make sure we're avoiding prescribed sins?

How does one begin to answer a question like, “How is it with your soul?”

As always, a decent place to start is by defining our terms. If we’re going to try to see how things are with our soul, we should probably have some idea of what a soul actually is.

So what is a soul?

Is it some kind of dualistic immaterial compartment of the self? The nonphysical stuff, the stuff that isn’t wasting away?

Is it the brain? The heart?

Is it the part of us that will float up into the clouds to meet Jesus and the angels and the harps, and take our place in the heavenly choir?

The Hebrew word translated “soul” in Psalm 63 is *nephesh*.

Like many Hebrew words, it has a wide range of meanings. It can mean anything from “self” to “person” to “mind.” It can refer to the appetites, desires, emotions, and passions. It can refer to the breath of life of itself.

But if we put it all together, we might say that “soul” is a word that points to the part of you that makes you *you*. It’s your essence, the part of you that is the continual thread that runs through all the changes that you undergo throughout your life.

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The word “soul” (*nephesh*) shows up three times in Psalm 63. It goes on a bit of a journey over the course of eight verses and it’s a journey that I think maps on to some of the themes of Lent and the life of faith more generally.

I want to go on this journey of the soul this morning. Let’s start with verse 1.

***My soul thirsts for you...***

The soul begins in an appropriate place for the season of Lent: in the wilderness. The superscription under the heading in most of your bibles says, “A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.”

So, it’s a wilderness song.

We’re not sure if this was written when David was a young man, hiding in the caves, running from

the manic King Saul or later on in his life when he fled Jerusalem during his son Absalom's insurrection.

But he was in a dry and weary land, literally and metaphorically.

And in the wilderness, David longs for God. His language is drenched with need and desire.

*My soul thirsts, my flesh faints...*

David's need is desperate, and his words reflect this.

Again, I'm not sure what your reaction is to this kind of raw expression of need. Maybe you think this is kind of an embarrassing display of spiritual fervour.

Maybe you've seen one too many passionate displays of piety held up as the norm to which we should all aspire and you're skeptical.

Maybe these words seem unrealistic to you—you can't imagine thirsting for God like this and words like this make you feel like you can't measure up.

Or maybe you're right there with David. You know exactly what it is to thirst like this.

Wherever you find yourself, I want to encourage each of us to simply pay attention to what we long for.

Samuel Wells wrote an article last year called, "The hunger that no meal satisfies." He talks about two kinds of hunger: the hunger that has a name and the hunger that has no name.

We all know about the hunger that has a name.

It's a hunger where you know what you want but you haven't got it or can't have it: when you interviewed for a job, and you can't understand why they didn't appoint you; when you long with all your heart to have a baby, but it's not happening; where you're dying for something to eat, but the cupboard's bare; when you just want something, something in your life to go right for a change, but people keep letting you down.<sup>1</sup>

These hungers and many others like them we understand well. The object of our desire is

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/hunger-no-meal-satisfies?fbclid=IwAR1ae\\_ZcUhwI-WgVNgLZ0DZ1qAuiUpHH\\_awHJoZ1AbLjF5uhTykkY-8jOY](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/hunger-no-meal-satisfies?fbclid=IwAR1ae_ZcUhwI-WgVNgLZ0DZ1qAuiUpHH_awHJoZ1AbLjF5uhTykkY-8jOY)

understood, even it goes unrealized more often than we'd like.

But there's another kind of hunger, too. It's a hunger that remains, even when our stomachs are full, our bank accounts are stable, our relationships are satisfying.

It is a hunger and a thirst for a goodness you are convinced has yet to be fully realized, a kingdom you are determined to see coming. A hunger for eternity.

A hunger that weeps for the world's wickedness and for the losers to get a taste of winning. A hunger and a thirst for justice and peace and community. On Friday night, several of us attended a vigil at the Islamic centre for those who were killed at a mosque in New Zealand last week. It was good to be together, but as I stood there I grieved that it was another act violence and hatred and ignorance that brought us together.

A hunger for love—both the giving and the receiving. For things to be put right. For all manner of things to be well. For forgiveness. For rescue. For our heart's true home.

A hunger for... God.

This is what David longed for in the wilderness. This is what he sought, in the deepest part of his being.

The journey of a soul begins by paying attention to what we long for.

### **My soul is satisfied...**

And then, David says, "My soul is satisfied." Just like that. The soul has journeyed from desperate desire to satisfaction in a mere four verses!

Of course, in real time things take considerably longer than this.

Our souls are restless. We respond the soul's thirst for God in all kinds of unhealthy ways.

No sooner do I say, "pay attention to your desire" then I follow it with, "Pay attention how easily desire can be disordered."

I talked about this in last week's sermon. There are all kinds of little idols and addictions and distractions that we can use to attempt to satisfy the longing of our souls.

I spent last night at Streets Alive's annual fundraiser dinner. We heard many stories of people in our city who are drowning in addiction and of the social crisis that is leading people down

incredibly destructive paths.

Streets Alive is unique among those in our city who are working to address the crisis in that they insist upon a faith-based approach to the problem and in treating their clients as image-bearers of God. They recognize that, on some level, every addiction is an expression of misplaced longing and—the desire either to avoid the trauma of their childhood, to escape the pain of lives that have become less than they were created for.

People need good treatment and recovery programs. They need twelve-step programs and supportive therapy and community support and good jobs. But what they need more than anything is to know that they are loved by God and to experience this love. We heard this last night.

The stories we heard last night are some of the most obvious and desperate stories of disordered desire. Many of us have more socially approved addictions—food, smartphones, sports, exercise, whatever.

Ultimately, the soul's satisfaction can only come from God. As St. Augustine famously put it, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

David's knew this. His soul is satisfied by one thing: the steadfast love of God (Ps. 63:3). It is better than life itself, he says.

Life is a good thing! But David knows that our lives are short—they are but a breath, and then gone, remembered no more.

The love of God is trustworthy, unconditional, strong, true, eternal.

The journey of a soul begins by paying attention to desire, recognizing the ways in which desire is easily disordered, and finds its satisfaction in the love of God.

### ***My soul clings to you...***

The journey of the soul in Psalm 63 ends with clinging.

It would be great if the soul's journey were straightforward and linear—it begins with desire, is tweaked a bit to recalibrate our desires Godward, and then rests contentedly in satisfaction until our dying day.

It would be great if Psalm 63 was a simple three-step program to the life we've always wanted.

But that's not how life goes. That's not how faith works on this side of eternity, in a broken world, where we are always in process.

The soul's journey is kind of meandering and cyclical, in some ways. We keep circling back from longing to satisfaction back to longing again.

And through it all—whether we're in a dry and weary land or a land flowing with milk and honey—we come to realize that souls were made for clinging.

*My soul clings to you, David says. Your right hand upholds me.*

In the storms of life, in the confusing journey through the terrain of disordered and reordered desire, in seasons of doubt and despair, in seasons of satisfaction and delight, in seasons of strong hope and abiding love, in seasons of suffering and death... We cling to God.

We don't let go of the God who is our strength and our shield, the Author and the perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

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So, how is it with your soul on this third Sunday of Lent? Do you recognize your own soul's journey in this Psalm?

Are you longing? Do you have this hunger and a thirst that you can't quite name but which you sense is the deepest thing for which you were made?

Are you satisfied? Do you feel as if you have been set down at a rich feast? Does praise flow easily off your lips?

Are you clinging on for dear life?

Or, perhaps more likely, is your soul a bit of all three at the same time?

If this describes something like your soul's journey, I think we can answer, "It is well with my soul." We are in good company with David and countless other pursuers of God down through the ages.

I want to conclude with one final comment. One of the deepest Christian convictions is that in Jesus, God has come near.

**In Jesus, God clings to us.**

As you know, many of my days begin in an Anabaptist prayer-book called *Take Our Moments and Our Days*.

One line during morning prayer recently caught my attention: *You do not leave us alone.*

It occurred to me that there are two ways that this sentence could be interpreted.

*You do not leave us alone.*

You never stop pestering, prodding, convicting, unsettling, and provoking us. When we wander, your memory haunts us. When we nurse our private grievances, when we cling to bad habits and cherished sins, when rebellion seems preferable to faithfulness, when apathy seems more appealing than conviction, when you really just don't seem worth the bother, you continue to stalk our paths.

When we tire of the messy, disjointed, winding road of faith, you remain, uncomfortably, in front of us. When it all seems too unbelievable, when your silence grows too loud, when the stories from our Scriptures that speak of you are too ugly, too boring, too, confusing, when another prayer goes unanswered, when another story seems too soaked in pain to possibly take on, when we would rather just wash our hands of you and be left alone, you refuse to give us what we think we want.

You are the hound of heaven and, sometimes despite our most determined efforts, we cannot shake you.

*You do not leave us alone.*

You speak to us in whispers, in intuitions, in warm embraces, in convictions that won't seem to lose their hold on our souls. *I have not left you as orphans*, you say.

No, we are not alone. In this vast cosmos where our presence seems to barely register, we walk with you, who are stronger and truer than we will ever be. When we are weak and fragile, you are solid and strong.

When we are weary, you offer rest, renewal, new life. When we are full of joy and hope and peace, you add your glad amen.

When we hunger for meaning, for purpose, for something, anything—a clue! a sign!—to give hope that there is more to all this than meets the eye, your goodness and beauty overwhelm us.

When we need a friend for the road, you walk with us, to strengthen and inspire, gladden and encourage.

When we need forgiveness for the countless ways in which we fall short of your best intentions, we know the well never runs dry. When we long for salvation, we know that you are strong to save.

We know that it is you who will vindicate us—that it is you who will prove that all our frantic clinging and hoping has not been in vain.

*You do not leave us alone.* You are the lover, the guide, the source and destination of our souls' journey.

And for this, we give you thanks.

Amen.

