

Psalm 61      “The Rock at the End of the Earth”  
Deuteronomy 28:15-68  
Acts 1

September 16, 2012

Deuteronomy 28 warns Israel of what will happen if Israel rebels – if Israel disobeys God.

Verse 49 – “the LORD will bring a nation against you from far away,  
from the end of the earth...”

verse 64 – “And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples,  
from one end of the earth to the other”

There are lots of ways of describing God’s curse (as you can tell from Deuteronomy 28!),  
but one of those ways is the way of being alienated from your home –  
by being exiles – scattered “from one end of the earth to the other.”

Psalm 61 sings about that experience of exile.

*To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. Of David.*

Just because the superscription says “of David”  
does not mean that the Psalm was written by David.

It may have been written by David –  
or it may mean “about David” or “for David.”

These psalms ‘of David’ in Book 2 of the Psalter (Psalms 51-70) are certainly *Davidic* Psalms –  
and they should be read with David in view.

The author of the Psalm (whether David or someone else)  
wants you to think about David when you sing it.

But of course, Psalm 61 also says “to the choirmaster.”

This Psalm is not merely David’s private devotions.

This Psalm is specifically designed for the Levites to sing in the worship of Israel,  
“with stringed instruments.”

We don’t know all the details of musical arrangement and accompaniment in the temple,  
but we know that the singers and musicians were trained to be skilled musicians.

I want you to think about how this very basic superscription guides us in interpreting the Psalm.

Think about David – but also think about David from the perspective of the temple –  
from the perspective of the people of God worshiping God in the temple.

This double perspective on the psalms is built into the very fabric of the Psalter.

Books 1 and 2 of the Psalter (Psalms 1-72) train you to sing the Psalms  
with a view to David and Israel in the temple worshiping God.

What does this look like in Christ?

In Christ we are a holy temple –  
    indwelt by the same Holy Spirit who filled the Holy of Holies  
    in the days of Moses and Solomon.  
If Jesus is the Son of David who is the great singer of the Psalms,  
    then we are the choir and the musicians  
    that sing these Psalms about him and with him and in him.

The Psalms are the inspired songbook of the Old Testament.

They have been sung in the Christian church throughout all her history  
    (it has only been in the last hundred years or so  
    that they have faded out in many Protestant churches).  
And the Psalms have informed and trained countless hymn-writers.  
We learn from the Psalms how to write hymns.

So long as the Psalms have remained central in the praise of the church,  
    the hymnody of the church has generally been strong and vibrant.  
But when the Psalms drop out of the church's praise,  
    the hymnody invariably starts wandering in strange directions!

Most of the praise choruses of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
    came out of churches that had forgotten the Psalms –  
    and the result was forgettable (I used to be a guitarist in a charismatic church);  
but today you can find a lot of really interesting stuff coming out of Reformed circles –  
    especially from those that have recovered the Psalms.

[And incidentally, if we could get *more* musicians together, that would be great!  
    Last fall we did a couple of ensembles – we would love to do more.  
    If you play an instrument, talk to Gloria or myself!]

Sing Psalm 61

Read Acts 1

“and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem,  
    and in all Judea and Samaria,  
    and to the end of the earth.” (1:8b)

In Deuteronomy 28, being scattered to the ends of the earth was part of God's curse!  
In Acts 1, being scattered to the ends of the earth is part of God's blessing!

What has changed?

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (1:8a)  
The coming of the Holy Spirit changes everything and everyone!

**1. “From the End of the Earth I Call to You” (61:1-4)**

**a. My Situation: My Heart Is Fainting at the End of the Earth (v1-2a)**

*61 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.*

Psalm 61 starts in the midst of alienation and isolation.

You’ve heard me say, “You’re not the center of the universe.”

And that’s true – but you are incapable of inhabiting any other spot in the universe  
than the one that you are in!

You may not be the center of the universe –  
you may be at the ends of the earth!

But all that means is that you are experiencing alienation and isolation,  
because knowing that you are not the center  
only increases your sense of disconnectedness.

Never in human history have people been so connected.

And yet never in human history have people been so alone.

The sheer volume of connections can render each one virtually meaningless.

I have read a large portion of the correspondence of Robert Jefferson Breckinridge,

a 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor who was well connected

to pastors and politicians all over the United States (and some in Europe).

He spent an immense amount of time writing lengthy letters to these friends and family.

Does anyone write lengthy letters anymore?

In an age of Tweets and texts, who has time?

Who has time to care enough about a friend to actually write what is on their heart?

I pity the biographer who wants to read all the correspondence of a 21<sup>st</sup> century figure!

Tweets and texts and blogs and Facebook – not to mention email.

All to capture the surface of a person’s life –

a life that rarely reveals anything beneath the surface!

But it’s there!

The alienation and isolation of the modern world

lies beneath the super-connected surface.

But there is nothing uniquely ‘modern’ about that sense of alienation and isolation.

Throughout all of human history people have experienced the profound sense  
of being dislocated from our *home*.

Where is “the end of the earth”?

We live on a round globe,  
so the “end of the earth” is a purely figurative expression for us!  
But what if the world was flat?  
If you live on a flat earth (or at least, if you think of the world as flat),  
then the “ends of the earth” would mean “away from the center.”

Think of how Jesus says it in Acts 1:  
“you shall be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria,  
*and to the end of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8)  
Jerusalem is the center of the universe.  
The further you get from Jerusalem, the closer you get to the end of the earth.

If you in terms of a Jerusalem-centered picture of the world,  
then we live pretty close to the “ends of the earth”!

For the Psalmist, to be at the ends of the earth is to be alienated – exiled –  
away from my true home.

And the one thing I want – more than anything else –  
is to be home!

I keep saying that *you* are not the center of the universe – Jesus is!

And yet, this sense of isolation and alienation is most profoundly seen in Jesus.  
Because Jesus is the center of the universe.  
He is the place where earth and heaven meet.  
And yet, the one man who was in fact the center of the universe,  
did not act like it!  
He humbled himself.  
He endured exile and humiliation.  
As John put it, “He came to his own [place],  
but his own people did not receive him.” (John 1:11)  
He was alienated not only from his own people –  
but he was isolated even from his Father:  
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And so the Psalmist cries out at the end of verse 2:

**b. My Plea: Lead Me to the Rock (v2b-3)**  
*Lead me to the rock*  
*that is higher than I,*  
<sup>3</sup>*for you have been my refuge,*  
*a strong tower against the enemy.*

The language of verses 2-4 is the language of the Divine Warrior.

“Lead me to the rock that is higher than I”  
the rock is a secure place – a stronghold.  
For most of human history, if you control the high ground,  
then you have the tactical advantage over your enemies.  
Arrows and rocks fly farther downhill than uphill –  
and it takes longer to run uphill!  
And especially if the top of a hill is *rocky*,  
then it can provide all sorts of natural defenses – and weapons!

And the Psalmist sees that God is “my refuge” – my “strong tower.”  
In a world characterized by instability and change,  
God is my rock.  
I know that I am not the center of the universe.  
I know that I am not stable – I cannot withstand the onslaught of my enemies.

But you can!  
You have been my refuge – my strong tower against my foes.

And so, in verse 4, the Psalmist expresses his hope:

**c. My Hope: Let Me Take Refuge Under the Shelter of Your Wings (v4)**  
<sup>4</sup> *Let me dwell in your tent forever!*  
*Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings! Selah*

The image of the “shadow of your wings” is a common picture in the Psalms –  
especially here in book 2 of the Psalter.

Psalms 57 and 63 both use the phrase “shadow of your wings” (also Psalms 17 and 36).  
Psalm 61 uses a similar phrase: the “shelter of your wings”

The language is also used in Ruth 2:12 –  
where Boaz speaks to Ruth and says that she has come to shelter  
under the wings of the Almighty.  
Later, Ruth will ask Boaz to cover her with *his* wing –  
to take her under *his* protection.

I want you to think about the picture here.  
The Psalmist has been banished to the ends of the earth –  
but the one thing that he wants is to dwell in God’s tent forever,  
taking refuge under the shelter of his wings.

This is temple language.  
Dwelling in God’s “tent” – under the “shelter” of the wings of the cherubim.

And this is what makes the superscription to this Psalm so ironic.  
Because the Psalmist writes this “to the choirmaster”  
for the Levitical choir to sing in the temple –  
literally “under the shadow” of the wings of the cherubim in the Most Holy Place!

So the Levitical choir sings in the temple,  
“from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint.”

Isn't Jerusalem the center of the universe?  
Isn't the temple the place where earth and heaven meet?

*Do not assume* that all Israelites had a simplistic theology!  
Solomon had said in his prayer at the dedication of the temple:  
“heaven of heavens cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built...”  
“hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive...”

Just because you are standing in the temple  
doesn't mean that you are home.

Even with the Holy of Holies forty feet away,  
the Levitical choir singing in the courtyard of the temple  
is, for all practical effects and purposes, at the ends of the earth!

Why?  
Because the Holy Spirit hasn't been poured out yet!  
“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is poured out....”  
As long as the glory of the LORD is stuck in that Holy of Holies –  
then even 40 feet away might as well be the end of the earth!

Do you know how that feels?

You are here – gathered in worship  
with the saints in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You are surrounded by brothers and sisters here around you,  
and by the heavenly hosts,  
and by the Triune God!

And yet you may well be crying out,  
“from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint.”

Now at the end of verse 4, we have no idea what “Selah” means.  
It appears to be some sort of musical or liturgical marker.

But it often comes at a key transition point in the Psalm.  
And certainly verse 5 is a key transition:

## 2. “My Vows” and My Prayers Are for the King (v5-8)

### a. My Confidence: You Have Heard My Vows (v5)

<sup>5</sup> *For you, O God, have heard my vows;  
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.*

Okay, there’s a pun there.

It’s a “key” transition?

The Hebrew word “ki” (a word translated ‘for’ or ‘because’)  
often signals a “key” transition in the Psalms!

“For you, O God”

Here the author stresses the *you*.

*I* am at the end of the earth (even if I’m in the temple!).

*You* are the one who hears in the heavens.

But what has God heard?

*you have heard my vows.*

What vows?

All throughout the history of the church – whether Old or New Testament –  
it has been common for believers to take vows –  
to make pledges before God.

Verses 5-8 begin and end with references to these “vows.”

Indeed, I would suggest that the Psalmist’s vows in verses 5 and 8,  
are intimately connected to verses 6-7.

*you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.*

The Psalmist recognizes that he shares in the inheritance of those who fear God.

I may currently be at the ends of the earth.

But my heritage – my past and my future – my true home,  
is with those who fear the name of the LORD.

And so the *vow* of the Psalmist is found in verses 6-7.

### b. My Prayer: Long Live the King!! (v6-7)

<sup>6</sup> *Prolong the life of the king;  
may his years endure to all generations!*

<sup>7</sup> *May he be enthroned forever before God;  
appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!*

This may sound like a strange vow.

After all, he is asking God to do something.  
But while there may not be a technical “if...then” clause in this vow,  
the implication is clearly seen in verse 8:

*if God will do this, then I will perform my vows day after day.*

The psalmist prays that God would prolong the life of the king,  
so that the king’s years would endure to all generations.

“O king, may you live forever!”

We normally think of that in the mouths of sycophants sucking up to kings.

The king knows he’s not going to live forever!

But woe to man who does not say so – since after all,

if you don’t want the king to live forever,

that must mean that you want the king to die!

But God’s promise to David was that his son would reign forever!

The Psalmist says, in effect, if you will do as you have promised,  
and therefore, if you prolong the life of the king forever,  
then I will praise you forever.

This is what the resurrection of Jesus is all about.

In the resurrection and ascension of Jesus,

God has prolonged the life of the king forever.

His years will endure to all generations!

He will be enthroned forever.

The last line of verse 7 is particularly interesting:

*appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!*

Steadfast love and faithfulness.

*Hesed and emeth.*

This pairing is commonly used in the Psalms to emphasize God’s covenant faithfulness.

Hesed is translated “steadfast love,” “covenant loyalty,” or “lovingkindness.”

It refers to God’s unfailing loyalty to his promises.

When God says that he will do something – he does it!

Emeth is translated “faithfulness” or “truth” (or perhaps “truthfulness”).

“Let God be *true* and every man a liar” is the point here.

God is *true* to his word.

It’s not just “truth” in the abstract sense.

But “true” in the concrete sense of someone who is true and trustworthy.

And when these words come together,



*hesed* and *emeth* are at the heart of who God is.

In Exodus 34:6, when the LORD appears to Moses,  
he says The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding  
in *steadfast love and faithfulness* (*hesed* and *emeth*).

(When the men promise Rahab that they will save her,  
they say “we will with you *hesed and emeth* – steadfast love and faithfulness” –  
Joshua 2:12)

It is curious:

there are key phrases from the story of Ruth and the story of Rahab –  
both in this short Psalm.

And of course, both Ruth and Rahab were fore-mothers of David!

But notice what the Psalmist says he will do:

**c. My Future: I Will Sing Praises and Perform My Vows (v8)**

<sup>8</sup> *So will I ever sing praises to your name,  
as I perform my vows day after day.*

And so therefore, we should always sing praises to the LORD.

God has done what he has promised.

He has established the king at his right hand forever.

His years will endure forever – to all generations!

And Jesus has promised that he will be with us even to the end of the age.

What does this mean for us?

Earlier, we read Jesus’ promise in Acts 1 –

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,  
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria  
and to the end of the earth.”

The resurrection and ascension of Jesus means that the new creation has come.

The coming of the Holy Spirit means that the power of the new creation –  
the resurrection life of Jesus himself –  
has come.

Which means that the ends of the earth have been transformed.

Because when the Holy Spirit comes upon the church,  
the result is that you are no longer what you once were!

As Westminster Seminary’s G. K. Beale has put it:

“If believers are merely *like* a new creation,  
they might get away with thinking that they really do not have to live and think radically  
as new creatures.

But if Christians are the actual beginning of the end-time new creation,  
they must act the way new creatures act,  
which is to live for Christ by viewing all of reality from the perspective of his word  
and not from the viewpoint of the world.

Just as a butterfly cannot return to its cocoon and act like a caterpillar again,  
so all who are part of the beginning fulfillment of the prophesied new creation in Christ  
cannot return to being unbelievers  
and, therefore, will perhaps slowly but surely  
act like people who have begun to be part of the new creation.

It is on the basis that Christians are a new creation that Paul can issue commands to them.

That is, they have the power to obey the commands  
by virtue of the new-creational ability inherent in them.”

(G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, p. 303.)

Yes, Jesus is the center of the universe –  
and his resurrection life now dwells in *you* by his Holy Spirit!

And so now, wherever you go,  
the center of the universe goes with you – because Christ is present with you  
by his Holy Spirit!

And so therefore, let us sing praises to his name  
and perform our vows day after day.

In the PCA we have articulated these vows in a particular form.

There are any number of ways it could be said –  
but if you think about what we have seen in Psalm 61,  
these vows may make more sense:

*1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?*

In other words, in yourself, are you the center of the universe?  
Or are you crying out, “have mercy!” from the end of the earth?

*2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*

Do you believe that Jesus is the king whose years endure to all generations?  
Do you trust in *him* as the rock that is higher than I –  
and do you take refuge under the shadow of his wings?

*3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?*

The third membership vow completes the Trinitarian pattern of the first three questions.

It reminds us that the Triune God is the one who has given us

“the heritage of those who fear” his name.

In your baptism God placed his name upon you:

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And because of the gift of the Holy Spirit,

you now share in the inheritance that the Father gave to his beloved Son!

In other words, the first three membership vows

are all about what God has already done in Jesus Christ!

*4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?*

Will you sing praises to the name of the LORD and perform your vows day after day?

The “worship and work” of the church

is not just ‘the official programs’ of this congregation.

The “worship and work” of the church certainly includes that!

But it extends into every facet of life

as we worship the triune God every day,

and labor together in the harvest fields that we walk through every day.

*5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?*

This takes us back “to the choirmaster” –

as we are reminded that this Psalm was written to be sung in the temple.

We need the body of Christ – we need the rest of the choir, as it were –

to join together and sing the praises of the LORD in harmony.

[announce Stolfus!]