

## Modern Longings: Ancient Words -- *The Longing for Transcendence*

### Psalm 63

Let me begin by telling you about my title, i.e., *The Longing for Transcendence*. I imagine that in a series of sermons about “modern longings”, you might think that few people would say that transcendence is among the things modern people long for. Consider your own deepest desires right now. What are you longing for most? Winning the lottery? Getting a good health report? Having the Dodgers win the World Series this year? But, does the word “transcendence” immediately pop into your mind as being one of the things you most fervently desire? I doubt it. So, let me speak with you for a while about what I mean by the longing for transcendence.

By **transcendence, I mean the existence of a reality that goes beyond the material realities of our world.** Transcendence refers to worldview that believes that the material world with its natural causes and processes is not all that is. There is a supernatural reality that is a part of existence.

In John Naisbitt’s first *Megatrends* book, a book that was #1 on the NY Times’ best-seller list for 2 years, he wrote of the growing influence of a world view among some scholars that seeks to explain everything in the universe by natural causes. Naisbitt predicted that people would react against that mechanical view of the world. He said that, because of that, we should expect people in the future to become more and more interested in the supernatural -- not less. More religious – not less. I agree with him.

I saw the truth of Naisbitt’s predictions when I moved to Europe in the 1970s. People were saying that all of Europe had become a secular society with no interest in religion. But, that wasn’t true. In those years, the growth of religions like New Age and witchcraft, even among the highly educated in Europe, was remarkable.

Stanford University sociologist **Theodore Roszak** wrote about this in his *Where the Wasteland Ends*. Although he was not a church goer, he said that the tendency among some in the scientific community to deny the supernatural and reduce everything to natural components will not be satisfying to the kinds of questions that human beings ask about life. He wrote that **there is “an irreducible intuition in human beings that reality is awesomely vast.”** He said people intuit that there are both natural and supernatural realities. He insisted that if you try to eradicate or suppress your search for something in this universe greater than yourself, it will be like putting a cork in Old Faithful. As I’m sure you know, that wouldn’t keep Old Faithful from erupting. No, it would break out in all sorts of crazy places and ways.

I became most convinced of this longing for transcendence when I was studying in Cambridge, England and heard a sermon on Ps 63 preached by... of all people... a scientist -- a chemist who had come to faith in Jesus and had sensed God’s call to the ministry. He loved being a scientist because he loved studying the material world and all its natural processes. But, he had come to believe that good science acknowledges that all reality cannot be explained in terms of material things and natural processes alone. Deep in his heart, he knew there had to be something and Someone, greater than this natural world. He loved creation -- but wanted to meet the Creator. The title of his sermon from Ps 63 was *The Search for Transcendence*.

We have a good number of scientists in our church too. One is a leader in our prayer ministries, Dr. Steve Cunningham. Another is one of our main worship leaders, Dr. Lauren White. When I tell this to people, I find they are often quite surprised. So, I’ve decided to ask Lauren to come and talk with me about this matter of how it is that a person can be a devoted scientist and, at the same time, a devoted follower of Jesus.

### INTERVIEW

**1. Lauren, maybe we’d better first establish that you’re a real scientist. What have you studied – and what is your current job?**

I have a bachelor’s in Chemistry and PhD in Chemistry. I started working in the field of Astrobiology after that. Prior to graduate school I studied Martian meteorites looking for signs of life (fossils) as evidence of life on Mars. During graduate school I took on an “origin of life” study from a professor at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Under his advisement, I performed experiments testing his theory for the origin of life from hydrothermal vents at the bottom of Earth’s oceans. After graduate school, I jumped into the engineering field. I’ve worked as a systems engineer for over 5 years now on 2 flight projects that launched and operated on the international space station and I’m currently working on the Mars 2020 rover launching to Mars next year.

**2. So, you’re an astrobiologist, chemist, engineer – a real “rocket scientist”? But, you write worship songs about Jesus and lead us in worship here at Lake. How do you put those two things together?**

I didn't put them together - God just wired me that way. He gave me a passion for Music and passion for Science. It actually feels quite natural to me to jump between the two. All of us are uniquely gifted by God and when you actively use those gifts to God's glory, at least for me, I feel more alive and near to God.

**3. I spoke about the chemist-pastor who loved being a scientist before becoming a Christian – but found that meeting his Creator through faith in Jesus deepened his love of science even more. Do you think that your relationship with your Maker enhances your love of science?**

Absolutely - even in my origin of life work I was constantly thinking on these amazing hydrothermal vents that God designed at the bottom of our ocean with tiny microbial life that exists perfectly in that environment. How did God create that system? Perhaps through some of the very chemistry I was testing? I didn't have to take a leap from that into a neo-Darwinian view that everything evolved slowly but I did wonder at how God created these systems if He would reveal it to us. He is the ultimate engineer and designer. The perfect balance in which all of this exists only affirms my faith.

**4. Lauren, try to envision being a scientist without any connection to God. Do you think that would change anything? Do you think you would have any kind of “longing for transcendence”?**

Everything would change. In science and engineering we often use calibration techniques - for cameras it's a physical calibration target. That target has a known and quantified resolution. In science, we use calibration curves where we first run a known quantity of a substance and then quantify the unknown substance against it. In other words, it's "truth" that we always check ourselves against to better understand our measurements. God is the ultimate truth, the calibration target for my life. I can always check myself and my circumstances against Him and the truth of His word.

If I'm going to be honest, I believe without this truth in my life I would be ruled by insecurity which I know leads to bitterness and emptiness. What I see most of all in my work place is people throwing their entire lives into 1 project. Their entire identity is wrapped up in this one thing. On one of my flight projects that I worked on - it got cancelled twice in a 3 years span! I would be devastated and bitter if my entire identity was wrapped up in that. When I find myself getting overwhelmed - I re-calibrate against God's truth. That I am a child of God. My identity is in Him. And He gave me these projects and jobs and He can take them away just as easily. But He is good. He is trustworthy. And so I don't have to be insecure or afraid or bitter - I can rest in my identity in Him and "wait, wait", as you put it these past 2 weeks, for further direction from Him.

In the moments we have left in our service, I want to take you to King David's longing for transcendence in Ps 63. It's a Bible passage that has shaped my ministry and affected my witness enormously. **Let's walk through the three phases of the Psalm as if we're journeying through the desert that David was in as he wrote it. Then, I'll tell you the two reasons I'm preaching this sermon in my last month as your Sr Pastor.**

**Journeying through the Desert**

**The 1st Phase: Identifying the Greatest Need -- (63:1).** *You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.*

Put yourself now in King David's shoes. He wasn't in the desert by choice. This wasn't a vacation trip to Palm Desert. No, he was hiding in that desert with his life in danger. This may have been the time when his son Absalom was seeking to take his kingdom away from him. If so, David would have had many needs in that desert as he wrote this Psalm: physical needs – like lodging, water and food. Occupational needs: his role as king seemed to be over. Relational needs: his family and closest associates had turned against him. What would your greatest longing have been at a time like that?

So, what is the greatest need that he expressed? He said, *“My whole being longs for you, my God, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.”* David here was speaking of the point I'm trying to make – that there are both natural and supernatural realities in our world. He understood the natural, material needs, didn't he? He said, *“I'm in a hot, dry and parched land and need some water.”* But, at the same time, he was aware of the spiritual and eternal part of him. He knew that, as hard as it might be for us to grasp, his longing for God

was his greatest longing. So, he said, “My body longs for water. That’s real. But, my whole being longs for you, my God!”

He knew the truth of what I spoke to you about last week from Ps 91, i.e., that **even if he got the water, it would not last. But, if he had God, nothing eternal could ever be taken from him.** So, let me make an assertion and you see if you agree: **The deepest need of your human heart is to know God.** At the beginning of the Bible, in Gen 2, we are told that God walked personally with people, i.e., we are made to “dwell with” God – to experience his presence and reality regularly. At the end of the Bible, when Jesus returns and makes all things new, we read in **Rev. 21:3** that we will again dwell in the unrestricted presence of God.

So, you and I now live in this in-between time – between the beginning in paradise and the end in the new creation. But, even in this in-between time, we human beings have been created to live life knowing that God is with us. We experience that presence of God now through faith in Jesus. Jesus came so that we who are alive to the natural world might also be made alive to God -- that we might be born again to eternal life with God.

The point is that all of us are human – made in the Creator’s image. Our greatest need is to know God. I am convinced that, deep down, all who are human have a longing for that kind of transcendence.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase: Zakar, Remembering God Even in the Desert (63:2-8).** *I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.*

God may have seemed far away when David was in the desert, but David knew God is real. How? Because he had experienced God genuinely. **Where had David experienced the reality of God?** He said in **v. 2** it was in his worship with God’s people in the sanctuary. In his worship among God’s people he had personally experienced the power and glory of God. So, when he was in a dry and barren place on his own, he remembered back to his worship and remembered that, as he said in **v. 3**, “God’s love is better than life.” And, as he proclaimed in **v. 4**, he wanted to praise God as long as he had physical life – even if he had to do it alone and in a desert. And, he added in **v. 5**, he will be satisfied with God’s presence even more that if he had the riches of foods – even if he had no food at the time.

So, in **v. 6**, in the worst time of his life, he remembered what he had experienced about God as he had worshipped with his family of faith. He remembered it in the day and all through the night. What he remembered was God’s reality, God’s love and God’s presence. He knew, as I so often say, there is no God-forsaken place or person in this world. David knew that the God who is real is also the God who is there!

And, I love **v. 8**, he declared, “My God – I cling to you. You are here, and I cling to you!” This could and should be a sermon on its own. But, I’ll simply ask you: “What do you cling to when you are in those desert times and God seems far away?” When you have truly met God, you remember – and you cling to him.

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> Phase: Living Today with the End in Mind (63:9-11).** *All those who make promises in God’s name will rejoice. But the mouths of liars will be shut.*

**David knew that his time in the desert would not last forever.** It’s clear that David was only in the desert because of enemies who were lying about him and were seeking to destroy him. I’m sure that, at the time, the enemies seemed strong and David seemed weak. But, he knew their kind of strength would not last – because the God who is God is a just God. David, with eyes of faith, in **vv. 9-11**, looked into God’s promise to bring about justice. He knew that God had promised that faith in God will ultimately be rewarded, and evil will be punished. He trusted God’s promise and was able to wait until God made things right. When you know that God is like that, you will find hope in the face of enemies. When you meet God and learn to know him, it will keep you going in the deserts of life until God finishes his work and makes all things right.

### **David’s Experience Can Be Yours (The Takeaway)**

So, now I want to tell you the two reasons why I wanted to preach to you about this topic.

The first reason is that **I want you to learn to meet God when you come to this sanctuary and worship together with your church family.** David was able to remember who God is and what God is like because he had deep and genuine experiences with God in his worship gatherings together with his people in the sanctuary. In his place of worship, he had beheld the power and glory of God. He had learned that God’s love is better than

life itself. He had learned to sing praise to God. Because he had been a faithful worshipper in the good times of his life, he was able to remember who God is even when he was under attack in the desert.

How might that happen for you as you worship with us at Lake? Well, we have some responsibilities as a church. We need to be faithful to putting God at the center of our worship services. We do that as they did in David's day, i.e., by singing songs that actually give praise to God and speak of his love and power and glory. And, also as happened in David's day, we must open the Word of God so that you can hear afresh what God says about himself and about life in this world. We must do this together as your church family. This is the mystery of Christ-centered community – which is what a church should be. We can meet God on our own but, when we worship God together, we experience God as David wrote about in this Psalm. As Jesus said in **Mt 18:20**, “*When 2 or 3 gather in my name, there I am with them.*” Jesus is always with us of course. But, it's clear that our experience of him is deepened as we worship in the sanctuary with our church family.

But, it's not just the church's responsibility to facilitate worship. You have responsibility too. A big part of your experience of God in worship is that you should come prepared to worship God and to hear his Word. Many of the Psalms speak of this. They are called Ascent Psalms. People would gather before the worship service and ascend from the bottom of the hill to the place of worship confessing their sins, remembering God's grace and opening up their minds and hearts to hear God's Word. I encourage you to do that even before you come to church. Come with your heart and mind ready to meet the Lord. If you have children, tell them of how you are longing to meet the Lord and pray with them that they will meet him in their church too.

Over the past few months, starting with Vacation Bible School, we have had a number of people who have returned to church after being away for a long time. Why? Many of them told me they had experienced something good about God and with God while they were here years ago – and longed for that to happen again. *I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.* **When you meet God in the sanctuary with your church family, you will be ready to face whatever happens in the deserts of your life.**

**The other reason I chose to speak to you from Ps 63 is I want you to let Psalm 63 impact the way you seek to witness to people about our faith in Jesus.** Again, I believe that deep in the hearts of all human beings is a longing for transcendence. I think that is true even of those who are most fervently resistant to any kind of faith. Human beings are made to know God and to live with God dwelling in their hearts. This was the experience of St. Augustine when he said in his *Confessions*, “*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.*”

I hold onto that conviction when I speak about Jesus even when I sense that those I speak with are antagonistic to what I'm saying. I remind myself that God has made them for himself -- even if they seem resistant at the time. Last June, Chris and I went back to my hometown of Bluefield, WV for my 50<sup>th</sup> High School reunion. I think both of us were surprised when classmate after classmate came up and told us that they had come to faith in Jesus. A number of them referred to my witness to them as a part of that. I could hardly believe it because some of them had been staunchly anti-religious. I felt that most of my attempts to witness to them had been weak and ineffective. But, God used those frail words because my friends had later come to a place in which they had a longing to know the God I sought to tell them about. I want you to see people that way. **Learn to see people as those who, deep down their hearts, have a place that only God can fill. That's how God has made us all: with a longing for transcendence that only God can satisfy.**

### Two Questions

What have you learned (or been reminded of) about God in the sanctuary today?

Is there anyone you should speak to about Jesus?