

Dependence in the Wilderness: Living Out of Psalm 63



By Jeff Newman

Psalm 63

A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

O God, You are my God.

I shall seek You earnestly.

My soul thirsts for You,

My flesh yearns for You,

In a dry and weary land where
there is no water.

Thus I have seen You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and Your glory.

Because Your lovingkindness is
better than life,

My lips will praise You.

So I will bless You as long as I live.

I will lift up my hands in Your name.

My soul is satisfied as with marrow
and fatness,

and my mouth offers praises
with joyful lips.

When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches,
For You have been my help,
and in the shadow of Your wings I sing
for joy.

My soul clings to You.

Your right hand upholds me.

But those who seek my life to destroy it,
They will go into the depths of the earth.
They will be delivered over to the power
of the sword.

They will be a prey for foxes.

But the king will rejoice in God.

Everyone who swears by Him will glory,
For the mouths of those who speak lies
will be stopped.

When was the last time you took an extended family vacation? If you are like our family, most of the time you grab a day or two here and there, or maybe a week once a year. But every now and then an opportunity comes to really get away—to truly disengage. Several summers ago we had just such an opportunity. God brought everything together at one time—finances, time for my wife and me to be away from our jobs and ministries, and the ages of our children. Sherry and I quietly planned a two-week trip packed with family, fun, and learning. Eventually, we let our children, Timothy and

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Johanna, then ages eleven and nine, in on the surprise. First, we arranged to spend several days with Grandma and Grandpa in Indiana. Both children bubbled over with all the activities they wanted to do with them. Next, we planned to go to Detroit to visit the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. Excitement continued to build. Not only were Grandma and Grandpa going with us, but this trip would also relate to what Timothy and Johanna had been studying in school. After Detroit, we planned to go to Niagara Falls for a few days. Our children had seen pictures and had heard me speak of my previous visit there while attending a conference and wanted to see the falls for themselves. Finally, on the way to Niagara Falls, we planned to spend a day in Ohio at an amusement park. I knew this would be the “big one,” especially for Timothy. Ever since his good friend described the many rides at this park, he had been dropping not-so-subtle hints of his desire to go. If we could have

God—but we want the “fun” of reaching the goal without putting out any effort. If only we could skip the journey and arrive instantly at that glorious destination.

Psalm 63 calls us to a different outlook. It invites us to recognize the value of the journey along with the greatness of the destination. The very title of the Psalm—*A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah*—calls us to look into David’s heart in the wilderness. It invites us to observe a child of God growing in his dependence on the Lord as he traveled through the wilderness on his way to glory.

In Psalm 63, we find David fleeing from his son, Absalom, into the wilderness of Judah. Our details differ from David’s, but all of God’s dear children experience wilderness. We often dislike the road that leads us to the glorious presence of our God. Sometimes the road into the wilderness seems mildly bearable. At other times it becomes increasingly arid, bitter, and even unbearable. Each step calls us to the full

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harnessed the energy he spent in celebrating, we could have disconnected the house from the utility company and never paid another power bill.

As the celebrating died down, reality began to take hold. All of these destinations looked great, but to reach them, we would be in the car for a very long time. Johanna said with a bit of a whine, “All the places sound like fun, but I’d rather stay home than spend hours and hours and hours in the car.” Timothy asked if we could travel at night. I knew what he had in mind. To him everything looks more interesting at night, and if he gets bored, he goes to sleep. Both children wanted the fun of the trip without the effort of the journey. In truth, I understood and agreed with them. If only we could be immediately transported to our destinations without the long hours in the car.

I see a connection between the desires of my children and our desires as Christians traveling on the path to glory. Our hearts long for the final destination in the presence of

and purposeful use of all our effort and energy. Sometimes the wilderness is “ordinary”: the pressures of daily deadlines, momentary strains in our relationships in the workplace or at home, the unexplained “clunk” in the car that may mean an expensive repair bill, or the frustration of a common cold that lasts for weeks. Fill in the blank for yourself. What does your wilderness look like? Living life in a sin-cursed world guarantees that arid (and ordinary) wilderness experiences will come—

- financial ruin, (or the weekly financial pressures);
- betrayal by friends, (or a simple disappointment);
- desertion by a spouse, (or the lonely moment of not being understood);
- the sorrow of seeing an adult child turn his or her back on God, (or the ordinary struggles of faith);
- chronic pain, (or the inconvenience of a sprained ankle);
- the sudden unexpected death of a spouse or

child, (or the empty feeling of the empty nest); or

- a terminal illness that results in the slow painful death of a parent, (or the slow loss of abilities with aging).

Again, fill in the blank for yourself. What does your wilderness look like today—at this very moment?

On every wilderness road, God wants us to grow in our dependence on Him. David needs God in Psalm 63. His dependency on Him provides us with a model to follow. David learned how to move toward his God and to grow in his faith when he found himself in the desert. He committed himself to three essential pursuits. As our faith in God grows in the midst of the wilderness, you and I will commit ourselves to these same pursuits.

1. *Seek God Earnestly.*

David says, “O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You . . .” David expressed his dependence on God in the midst of the wilderness by hunting for God. Just like an animal forages for food in the wilderness, David searched diligently for God. He thirsted after God in a land where no other thirsts could be satisfied. He longed for God, in the same way that a man dying of dehydration and starvation aches to have his thirst quenched and appetite satisfied. David cried out, “My soul clings to You.” He bound himself to God in a wilderness where he was tempted to despair and self-pity.

David, the man after God’s own heart, teaches us to seek God in the wilderness. While the king of Israel is running from his son, he guides us to the feet of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords of whom it is written “. . . we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” A King of Kings and Lord of Lords who exhorts us to *draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:15-16).

In David’s wilderness psalm, we see the most bitter wilderness journey of all foreshadowed by David’s Redeemer (and ours). Christ said to His disciples, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38).

The Lord Jesus Christ, our high priest, traveled through the dark wilderness while demonstrating perfect dependence on His Father in heaven. Such faith is not easy, tranquil, or happy. Luke 22:44 says, “And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.” In His grief, Christ’s weight of sorrow drove Him to seek His Father in prayer. As His disciples drifted off to sleep, Christ bound himself to His Father in Heaven, and with singleness of heart, He clung to the Father in prayer.

What do you seek after, thirst for, and yearn for in the wilderness of life? To what do you bind yourself? Repent of independence. Declare and demonstrate dependency on God by purposing to seek Him earnestly. Two questions can help you consider your desires during the tough times of life. First, are the *objects* of your desires sinful? Pornography and illicit sex? One more stiff drink? The next high? The calming effects of another cigarette? To bully others who get in your way? To end it all? To find the perfect get-rich-quick scheme? What do you seek after instead of thirsting for your God?

But if you fail to see yourself in this first question, don’t relax too quickly. The second, more difficult question captures all of us. Ask yourself, “If my desires in the wilderness are not sinful in and of themselves, do I crave these things so much that they diminish or replace hunger for God Himself? In order to face this second question with careful honesty, consider the times you become worried, anxious, fearful, angry, or bitter. What happened the last time your son or daughter disobeyed you? Did you respond with angry words and miss an opportunity to point your child to Christ? How did you respond when your husband failed to listen carefully to the events of your day? What did you do when your wife met you at the door when you got home from work and wanted to share her heart with you? What went on inside you when you sat down to pay the bills or opened your retirement savings account statement? How did you respond the last time you felt overlooked at church? Keep going. Be honest with yourself. Where do your sinful responses reveal that you seek after your own self

interests more that you seek after God? Where do your desires for power, love, peace, comfort, respect, control, autonomy, (or something else), seek to wrest the throne of your life away from God? Our anxiety, fear, anger, and bitterness in the wilderness reveal the hungers of our hearts that compete against our desire for God alone. God says, “Earnestly seek after Me.” “Thirst for Me.” “Bind yourself to Me.” We demonstrate trust in God when we hunger and thirst for Him above all else. Nothing short of seeking the Father in the midst of sorrow will transform us into the image of His dear Son, Jesus Christ.

2. *Reflect on God Continually.*

David sought God in the wilderness. He also *reflected* on God continually. Because he desired God above all else, he fixed his thoughts on God’s character and His works. David says, “When I remember you on my bed, I meditate on you in the night watches.” As he found himself in the midst of the wilderness, fleeing for his life, he re-created in his mind the record of

to God, he expressed his desire to see God in “His sanctuary.” David remembered the dwelling place of the holy God and went there in his mind, fitting the stone of God’s holiness into his altar. David longed to see the power of God in the actual temple, but instead David’s inner being became his sanctuary. The chosen king of God’s chosen people found himself powerless to change his circumstances. This helplessness drove David to meditate on the truth that he worshipped the all-powerful God of the universe. In a barren land, David served a glorious God. He reminded himself of the glory of his God symbolized by the sanctuary and placed the stone of God’s glory into the altar of his memory.

David declared, “Your lovingkindness is more than life.” Even in a harsh wilderness, God loved David with an unchanging, loyal, and zealous love. David consciously remembered. He knew God would evidence His love for him through tender care and compassion. He treasured this lovingkindness more than he

David built an altar to God in his mind.

God’s character and works. Instead of succumbing to the temptation to believe lies about his God, himself, and his situation, David erected an altar to God in his mind. He went there to worship and to think. Instead of spinning all the possible “what-if” scenarios, or instead of plotting revenge in intricate embittered detail, David meditated on the wonderful nature and works of his God. Instead of allowing his thoughts to wander with him in the wilderness, David set his thoughts on God.

David built an altar to God in his mind. He carefully crafted this altar from the stones of God’s character and actions. First, David reminded himself that the God of Jerusalem—the God of the wilderness, too—was his God. “O God, You are my God,” he cried. David laid the foundation of this altar in his mind by meditating on the fact that the creator God was *HIS*. David belonged to God. God belonged to David. Then, David fixed his mind on God’s holiness, power, and glory. In his heart’s prayer

treasured life itself. David added the stone of loving kindness to the growing altar. He then fell down and worshipped the God with whom he enjoyed a personal relationship—the God who promised to be his God.

Not only did David, in his inner man, build an altar from God’s character and attributes, he also laid down stones that reminded him of how God worked faithfully and lovingly on his behalf. These stones, in a series of captivating word pictures, pulled David’s attention away from his difficult circumstances.

My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness. David reminded himself that God satisfied more than the finest foods in the most lavish feast back in his palace. Fleeing into the wilderness, David pictured himself pushing back from the great banquet table, fully satisfied in his God. Instead of allowing his thoughts to dwell on the lack of food in the wilderness, he meditated on the abundant supply. Do you hear this? Can you taste it?

For You have been my help, and in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy. David told God, “You protect me” even in one of the most perilous places on earth. David had observed how a mother bird protects her children in the harsh wilderness. He connected the dots to the work of God in his life, to the character of his God. Though in the wilderness, and vulnerable, he dwelt at that very moment under the protective wings of his God.

My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me. David pictured God as the strong arm of his deliverance. Away from all the kingdom symbols of power, protection, and deliverance—the walled city of Jerusalem, the hosts of the king’s army, the instruments of warfare—David knew God would safely hold him.

Finally, David meditated on the ultimate deliverance when God will right all wrongs.

But those who seek my life to destroy it, will go into the depths of the earth. They will be delivered over to the power of the sword; they will be a prey for foxes. But the king will rejoice in God; everyone who swears by Him will glory, for the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.

Can you see this picture? God’s justice will prevail. Whatever his fate in the wilderness, David knows that in the last day God will vindicate him. God will weaken and destroy his enemies, inviting the foxes to feast on their remains. David reminds himself that God will expose the lies against him. God will render dumb those who speak against him. God’s justice defends His own both now and for all eternity. This justice sits on the top of David’s altar of remembrance—the capstone.

David consciously reflected on God’s character and works. David’s God is holy, powerful, glorious, and full of lovingkindness. He satisfies. He protects. He delivers. He rules with holy justice. Meditating on the one true God through the night, in a dry and weary land, David built a true altar to the Lord. Then, David bowed in his inner man and worshipped God.

As with David, so with Christ. In Jesus’ wilderness experience, He fixed His attention on His Father. In the garden, He knelt before His Father and prayed, “Father, if You are

willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Christ knew what He would face. He submitted Himself to His *loving Father in heaven*. That word picture held His attention. As He hung on the cross, Jesus bound His thoughts to the purpose of accomplishing *the Father’s* will. Christ fixed His mind on His all-wise, all-loving Father in the midst of His wilderness experience. Because of this, He said, “*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). In the final moments of His earthly life, Jesus said, “*Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit*” (Luke 23:46). As Christ died the death reserved for the worst of criminals, His words expressed the overflow of His heart: purposeful, truthful meditation on His Father’s character and works.

As with David, so with Christ, and so with *you*. Respond with the same purposefulness of thought. Walk *with Him* through the wilderness. What does the altar in your mind look like? Is it broken down and in need of rebuilding? Do you allow the lies of the world, flesh, and devil to take over the place of worship that should be set apart for God alone? Tear down these powerful lies that call you to doubt the holy, loving goodness of God. Tear down these lies that make you forget what is true. Meditate on the truth of God. Don’t bow down to the thoughts and captivating pictures that lead to fear, worry, and desperation. Rejoice that the creator God of the universe is your Father and God.

As David observed the routine elements of the wilderness—hot, dry, threatening, lonely—he transformed them into wonderful word pictures that directed his attention to God. Take the routine elements of the situation in which God has placed you and interpret them through the lens of His Word. Let the word pictures and captivating metaphors of Scripture remind you of the work of your God on your behalf. How can the furnishings of your home and workplace remind you of God? How can the scenery on the commute to work direct your heart to Him? How can mundane things become glorious as you transform them into reminders of God, building an altar to Him in your mind?

God gives you a wonderful opportunity in

the wilderness—an opportunity to set your mind to work on learning more of His character and works. In the wilderness, we must set our minds to growing in our knowledge of Him through His Word. When we meditate on Him, the very situation in which we find ourselves becomes a land filled with reminders of our God.

3. *Praise God Submissively.*

As we have walked through this psalm together, have you noticed how words of praise permeate the text? David wrote, “My lips will praise You.” He then exclaimed, “I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.” He declared, “My mouth offers praises with joyful lips.” He sang for joy as he pictured himself protected by the wings of the Almighty. In his final proclamation, David brought fullest expression to his praise when he announced, “The king will rejoice in God. Everyone who swears by Him will glory.”

David used rich vocabulary to express his

sought after and fixed His mind on His Father. This resulted in submissive praise to His Father: “for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross.” Christ’s praise expressed itself vividly in fulfilling the Father’s work. He remained faithful to the very end. Remember what took place as He was in the process of dying an excruciating death?

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” It was now about the

In the depths of the darkness of the wilderness, Christ responded with a wondrous act of submissive praise to His God.

praise to God in this psalm. He commended God to others. David bowed in submissive adoration before His God. He spoke and sang with accuracy and precision about the wonderful character and works of His God. David made himself glad through his complete dependence on God in the wilderness. He praised his God in thoughts, in words, and through acts of submissive obedience. In a place where his sinful heart cried out for him to submit to grumbling and complaining, David chose rather to submit to abundant praise. Because David sought His God earnestly, reflected on Him continually, and praised Him submissively, God used the wilderness to continue His work of transformation in David’s heart.

Notice how our Lord Jesus Christ praised His Father in the midst of the wilderness. As He left His last supper with His disciples, He sang psalms of praise to His Father while He entered the wilderness. As Christ hung on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, He

sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two (Luke 23:39-45).

Do you see it? Look carefully. In the depths of the darkness of the wilderness, Christ responded with a wondrous act of submissive praise to His God. At a time when sinful man would have been fully absorbed with his own pain and suffering, our suffering Savior brought praise to His Father. He entered into an undeserving thief’s suffering, and redeemed him moments before he would have faced the eternal torments of hell. Instead, this repentant thief joined his suffering Savior in Paradise—a place of rejoicing, thanksgiving, and happiness in God.

What do you and I speak of when we find ourselves in the wilderness? Stop and listen to yourself. What are the topics of your conversations inside your head or with others? Where is God? Whose concerns become your

primary focus? Speak words of praise to Him in the wilderness. Commend Him to others—and to your own soul. Bow submissively in His presence and adore Him.

What can we do to praise God in the wilderness in specific and concrete ways? Make a list of the blessings of God in your life, even as you face each day in the wilderness. Remember the ordinary—shelter, food, breath, flowers, brothers and sisters in Christ—as well as the extraordinary. Use the list to guide your prayers of praise to God. Plan to share these specific blessings of God in your life with your family and with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

When I am in the wilderness, I tend to neglect some of my responsibilities of submissive obedience to God. I suspect you have a similar struggle. Make a list of those responsibilities that you tend to neglect while in the wilderness—spending time in the Word of God and prayer, ironing, returning phone calls, writing that difficult memo, paying bills, tidying up, going out of your way to take an interest in someone else. Make your list personal and concrete. Begin today to fulfill those responsibilities as a sacrifice of submissive praise to your God. Take this a step further and make a list of new proactive ways you can demonstrate your faith in God and love for others. Whom can you reach out to with acts of love and kindness? Again, make it concrete and personal. “I will call Mary and see how she is doing today.” “I will bake cookies and take them to Aunt Harriet.” “I will call ahead and stop by Jerry’s office to pray with him concerning his wayward son.” Keep going. To whom does God want you to minister today? Begin doing these acts of faith and love as an expression of submissive praise to God in the wilderness.

At times, we find ourselves in the wilderness because we live in a sinful world with other sinners and much suffering. But at other times, we find ourselves in the wilderness because we ourselves are sinners. How do we bring praise to God in a wilderness of our own creating? God offers us the clear answer in His Word. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Seek after Him through turning in repentance. Ask

Him for forgiveness. Seek the forgiveness of those we have sinned against. Return again to reflect on the glory of our God and His faithful works on our behalf. We praise Him by submitting to His Word in humble obedience. Then share the story of the faithful, forgiving, transforming God with other fellow travelers who need His encouragement in the wilderness.

In Psalm 63, God has given us an infallible guide to help us as we travel life’s wilderness roads. We trust in our God and His Word for our eternal destiny. We can also trust in Him for the journey to that destination. He has promised us a safe arrival after our wilderness journey.

A Final Word

As the time of our family vacation drew closer, I assembled two notebooks—one for Timothy and one for Johanna—to guide my children through our trip. In these notebooks, I included travel brochures and printouts from the Internet that described in words and pictures the destinations and activities we had planned. In addition, I reserved one place in each notebook for a set of maps that I printed using my computer map software. The first map showed the entire route on one page. Each page that followed pictured the distance planned for one day of travel. When I printed these, I forgot to include the scale on each map. My two astute geography students immediately noticed and proceeded to remind me that each day’s trip looked like it was the same length. Whether the particular map was of the entire trip or of fifty miles, or of 400 miles, every map looked like we would only have to travel about six inches!

In a sense, God operates in a similar way, but purposefully. He has told us the destination. He has promised us a sure and safe arrival at the destination. He has left us with a Guidebook to follow as we travel to our destination. In addition, He has given us our own personal Guide in the person of the Holy Spirit. His Son has traveled the path before us. Yet, He does not give us a scale to determine how long each leg of the journey will be.

Truthfully, most of the time I want a scale. Instead, God says, “Seek after Me earnestly.” Turn from seeking the desires that lead to dead

ends. He calls to us, "Reflect on Me continually." Refuse to allow the road construction and rough terrain to distract you. God invites us, "Praise Me submissively." Speak words of praise to Him. Finally, one day, on that final day, we will look back across the entire journey and see it as a path to becoming like His Son.

A Psalm 63 Journal

Don't set aside this psalm and its truth, but rather purpose to knead its truths into your daily life. Begin today. The journal page and instructions below have been designed to help you set your feet on the path of becoming more like David and, most importantly, more like Christ as you travel through your wilderness. Set aside some time today to begin. Use this journal each day to assist you as you seek to grow in your dependence on God in the wilderness.

1. Describe the "wilderness" troubles you face today. Include the ordinary and the extraordinary—the routine and the arid. Be specific. Put your sufferings into words as David did in the Psalms.

2. Seek God in the words of Psalm 63:1. Memorize these words. Speak to God. As part of seeking God, evaluate what you are tempted to seek after instead. Where do you say, "If only _____, then I'd be happy?" As you seek Him, confess what tends to distract you.

3. Search for truth about God's character and works in your daily Scripture reading. Begin with what Psalm 63 says. Then branch out. Since we find truth about God on every page of the Scripture, begin where you are. In every passage of Scripture you read ask, "What does this show me about who God is and how He works?" Throughout the day, set your mind to transforming the routine elements of your situation into wonderful reminders of the character and works of God revealed to you in His Word.

4. Plan to praise God in word and in deed. Connect the truth of Psalm 63 to the admonition of Hebrew 13:15-16.

Through Him then, let us continually offer

up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

List some of God's blessings. Remember to include the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. Pray a prayer of thankful praise for these blessings of God in your life. Name the person with whom you will share these blessings today. List several key responsibilities that you plan to fulfill today as an act of praise to God. Remember to choose those responsibilities that you might normally neglect. Make the list concrete and specific. Finally, be proactive. Plan one way that you can reach out to someone with love and kindness. Be realistic. Be specific.

David's growth in his dependence on God in the wilderness involved repetition. For example, many times in the Psalms David meditated on God as his refuge. Your journal should reflect this same repetition. For example, when you find yourself routinely replacing a desire for God with seeking after financial security or with wanting people to accept you, confess it each time. If God's holy love captivates your thoughts, list it again tomorrow on the stones. If one or two word pictures captivate you and direct your thoughts to God, return to them over and over again. Resist the idea that you have to come up with some new thought each day. Remember, David returned to several key themes over and over again. You should do the same.

Finally, guard your motives for engaging in this pursuit on your wilderness journey. Success is not escaping the wilderness, but growing to become like Christ in the wilderness. The Psalms teach us that David persevered in his pursuit of God. Do the same. Grow in your dependence on Him. Until that day when we see Him face to face—when God completes His glorious work of transformation in our lives.

Use the diagram that follows as a tool to help you turn to God in the midst of your wilderness. Work your way from the bottom of the diagram to the top.

My Psalm 63 Journal

4. Praise God Submissively .

... With My Words

What will I say to God?

- ◆
- ◆
- ◆
- ◆

Who can share in my praises?

- ◆
- ◆

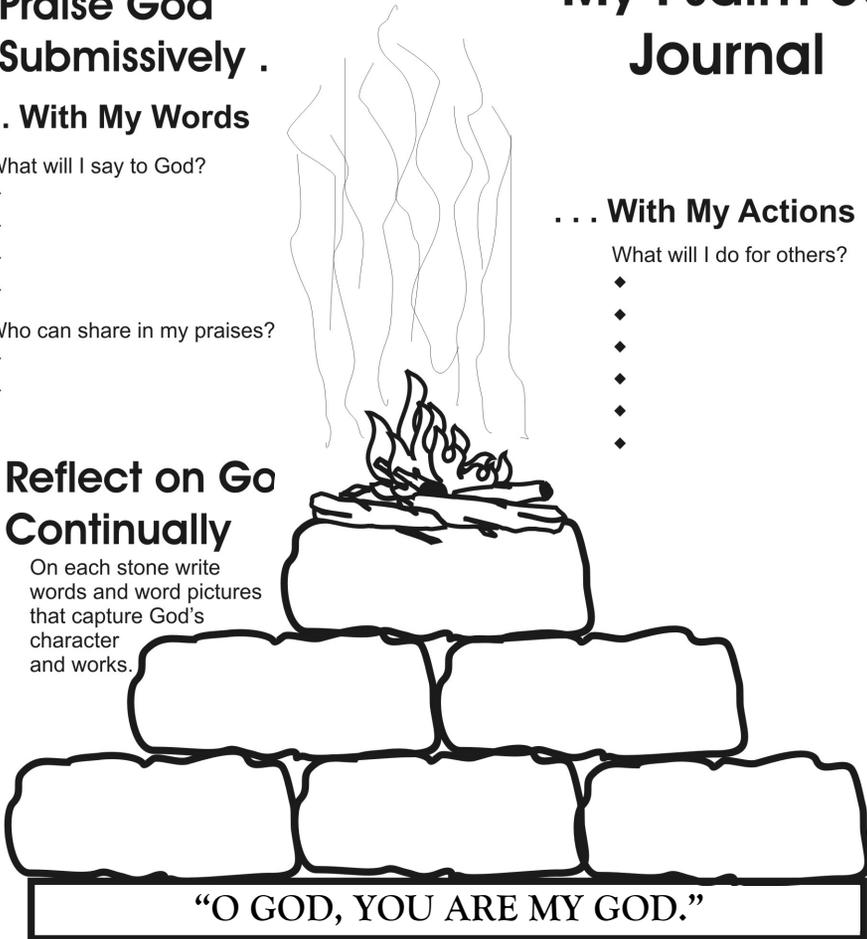
... With My Actions

What will I do for others?

- ◆
- ◆
- ◆
- ◆
- ◆

3. Reflect on God Continually

On each stone write words and word pictures that capture God's character and works.



2. Seek God Earnestly

What am I tempted to seek after, thirst for, or long for instead of (or more than) God?
List these desires. Confess them to God as sin.

1. Describe the Wilderness

Remember to include the ordinary and the arid.

Date: _____ Scripture Reading and Meditation: _____