

The emotional and poetic range of worship provided in the psalms is greater than we are accustomed to in our personal devotions and in our corporate worship. Shame and entrapment are not typical Sunday morning themes. We avoid words like, “affliction,” “anguish,” “accusation,” and “alarm” in our user-friendly worship services. We confess our sins in language that has lost its bite. We refuse to lament the grief and distress caused by our enemies. Compared to the psalmist our worship has lost its edge. The psalms resist our efforts to exclude the realities of violence, war, cancer, death, abuse, and betrayal from our worship. Psalm 31 rings true to the psalms, but it jars the sanctimonious piety of polite religious people who have not come to church to be reminded that our struggle is “against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Psalm 31 fits with the apostle James’ spiritual direction:

“Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:7-10).

We seem oblivious to the dangers that threaten our lives and overly familiar with a benign and benevolent deity that we hope will preserve our precious immortality symbols. Annie Dillard asked,

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”¹

David composed psalms for worshipers who faced apostasy, illness, contempt, isolation, conspiracy, hostility, discrimination, and persecution. If we struggle to line-up Psalm 31 with our reality it may be because we have compartmentalized religion into a habit of indifference. Instead of placing our lives in the hands of God, we trust in modern medicine, national security, financial securities, technology, social networks, and our careers. When we are young and vigorous and well-insured, we tell ourselves that we live above the fray. But then, without warning the shield comes down, exposing our many vulnerabilities and frailties. It is surprising how a visit to the ER can transport us back to the world of the psalmist.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 40-41.

This dire “situation of need” describes a litany of evils reminiscent of Psalm 22 and reflective of the imagery and language of Psalms 4; 7; 18; 28; and 71.²

Situational Awareness

*In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.
Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
Be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.
Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.
Keep me free from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hands I commit my spirit;
deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.
I hate those who cling to worthless idols;
as for me, I trust in the Lord.
I will be glad and rejoice in your love,
for you saw my affliction
and knew the anguish of my soul.
You have not given me into the hands of the enemy
but have set my feet in a spacious place.*

Psalm 31:1-8

In worship the soul longs to move from affliction to assurance.³ We turn to Yahweh for refuge and pray a psalm that Jeremiah, Jonah, and Jesus prayed. The psalmist’s affliction encompasses physical illness, emotional trauma, and enemy opposition. The lament is general enough to include our particular affliction. Its spiritual direction is specific enough to inspire our trust. The movement from affliction to assurance is prayed through twice (Ps 31:1-8; 31:9-24) to form a double witness to the necessity of worship and the need for deliverance.

We are accustomed to David’s use of metaphor to illustrate the worshiper’s trust in Yahweh. The Lord is his refuge, his rock of refuge, and his strong fortress. These images of unmovable stability and impenetrable security are juxtaposed with first-responder urgency and emergency rescues. David shouts, “come quickly to rescue me” (Ps 31:2) and “keep me from the trap that is set for me” (Ps 31:4). He is confident that the Lord has turned his ear to him (Ps 31:2), held him in his hands (Ps 31:5), and seen his affliction (Ps 31:7). The psalmist knows that his deliverance is not based on his merit but on the Lord’s righteousness, guidance, and faithfulness (Ps 3:1,3,5). His hatred for those who cling to worthless idols and his joy in the Lord’s love is evidence of that

² Goldingay, Psalms, 437.

³ Ross, Psalms, 684.

righteousness (Ps 31:5,6,7).

Psalm 31 and Psalm 22 cover related themes of lament and deliverance.⁴ Jesus quoted from both psalms on the cross and he did so in a way that resonates with the meaning of the whole psalm. Psalm 22 begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and ends, “They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!” (Ps 22:1,31). Jesus’ fourth and sixth statements from the cross reflect Psalm 22.

The seventh and final word from the cross comes from Psalm 31: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” Patrick Reardon takes this verse as “the proper ‘voice’ of this whole psalm. It is the prayer of ‘Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame’ (Heb 12:2), speaking to His Father in the context of His sufferings and death. This psalm is part of His prayer of faith.”⁵

Luke writes, “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he said this, he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46). Jesus ends his earthly ministry with a shout. His final prayer testifies to his complete control. “I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:17-18). The final word from the cross was a shout not a gasp, a declaration of hope, not a cry of despair. Instead of giving up, Jesus offered up; instead of surrendering to fate, he committed himself in faith. Not a note of resignation, but the expectation of resurrection. Not a sigh of relief, but a prayer of confidence.

Before this final word from the cross was on the lips of Jesus it was prayed by King David and the people of God down through the centuries. The early church prayed Psalm 31:5 as well. The first Christian martyr, Stephen, followed the example of Jesus. “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’” (Acts 7:59). However, this is not a prayer to be prayed only at the end of life, but a prayer to be prayed today. In whose hands will we put our trust? Only the one true and living God, Father, Son, and Spirit is worthy of our trust. Only in his hands are we delivered out of the hands of our enemies (Ps 31:8, 15). He alone is able to guard what we have entrusted to his care (2 Tim 1:12). As Jesus gave himself into the Father's hands, so we give ourselves into the hands of God. Today is the day to pray, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

David closes the first stanza of the psalm with a deep sense of assurance. The Lord has seen his affliction and understood his anxious soul and redeemed him. The psalmist is glad and rejoices in Yahweh’s love. Instead of walking a narrow cliff path and falling into the hands of his enemies, the Lord has set his feet in a spacious place.⁶ Augustine attributed this image of the spacious room to the freedom found in the hope of the resurrection. He writes, “The resurrection of my Lord being known, and mine own being promised me, my love, having been brought out of the

⁴ Goldingay, Psalms, 436.

⁵ Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 59.

⁶ Goldingay, Psalms, 441.

straits of fear, walks abroad in continuance, into the expanse of liberty.”⁷

Terror on Every Side

*Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and body with grief.
My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
My strength fails because of my affliction,
and my bones grow weak.
Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends –
those who see me on the street flee from me.
I am forgotten as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery.
For I hear many whispering,
“Terror on every side!”
They conspire against me
and plot to take my life.
But I trust in you, Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”
My times are in your hands;
deliver me from the hands of my enemies,
from those who pursue me.
Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your unfailing love.
Let me not be put to shame, Lord,
for I have cried out to you;
but let the wicked be put to shame
and be silent in realm of the dead.
Let their lying lips be silenced,
for with pride and contempt
they speak arrogantly against the righteous.
How abundant are the good things
that you have stored up for those who fear you,
that you bestow in the sight of all,
on those who take refuge in you.
In the shelter of your presence you hide them
from all human intrigues;
you keep them safe in your dwelling
from accusing tongues.*

⁷Augustine, Psalms, 69.

Jeremiah drew on Psalm 31 to capture his distress. He used the psalmist's phrase, "terror on every side" as his "motto theme," for (Jer 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29; Lam 2:22).⁸ In a phrase it described God's pending judgment against Jerusalem. When Pashhur the official in charge of the temple released Jeremiah from the stocks, the prophet announced, "The Lord's name for you is not Passhur, but *Terror on Every Side*. For this is what the Lord says: 'I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends'" (Jer 20:3-4). Jeremiah used the expression so often that people used it to mock him. He became known as the "Terror on Every Side" Prophet (Jer 20:10). Nevertheless it was the slogan of choice to sum up God's judgment and the desperate human condition. It is easy to see how Jeremiah identified with the whole psalm and not just this phase. David's eyes grew weak with sorrow (Ps 31:9) and Jeremiah's eyes were a fountain of tears (Jer 9:1). The psalmist's life was "consumed by anguish" (Ps 31:10) and the prophet was consumed by trouble and sorrow (Jer 20:18). David's bones grew weak (Ps 31:10; Jeremiah's bones trembled (Jer 23:9). David felt like a broken piece of pottery (Ps 31:12) and Jeremiah broke a piece of pottery to illustrate the judgment of God (Jer 19:10-11). Both the psalmist and the prophet felt vulnerable and outnumbered by their enemies. Even their neighbors showed them contempt and their friends abandoned them.

The psalmist put words to the prophet's anguish and Jeremiah prayed them out. When someone articulates our experience and gives us words to explain our grief and to express our trust, we feel we are not so alone. It is a great gift when someone puts our pain into words. Psalm 31 offers a deep expression of empathy with all those who pay a price for faithfulness. We cannot chalk this up to "misery loves company." The distress is real and empathy is essential. And what the psalms did for Jeremiah they will do for us. We need the psalms just as much as Jeremiah did. When the psalms direct our worship they offer the worshiper the gift of empathy.

Having articulated his anguish, David announces his assurance. "But I – I have trusted in you, O Lord; I have said, 'You are my God.'" The emotional reversal is decisive and dramatic. The first person singular is emphatic. The psalmist owns the decision to trust in Yahweh. In the first stanza, deliverance is based on the Lord's righteousness (Ps 31:1). In the second stanza, trust is rooted in God's sovereignty, "my times are in your hands," and in God's "unfailing love." In spite of everything, he looks to the Lord alone for his blessing (Num 6:25). The only way he is going to be saved from his enemies is by the Lord. The only way lying lips are going to be silenced is by the Lord. Both David and Jeremiah confronted the power of falsehood and deception with the greater power of the truth of God. Jeremiah declared, "Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!'" Instead of "trusting in deceptive words that are worthless" (Jer 7:4,8), they placed their trust in the Lord.

This section closes with the psalmist's resounding confidence in the Lord. The litany of evil that besets the present situation will not last forever. There will be a public vindication for all those who fear the Lord. God will bestow on them all the benefits he has reserved for them. They will be kept safe "from all human intrigues" and false accusations (Ps 31:20). David's confidence is

⁸ Kidner, *Psalms*, 131.

⁹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 257.

consistent with the apostle Paul's expectation: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Today, we grasp more fully the promise foreshadowed by the psalmist. In the upper room on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus promised his disciples that they would be with him in glory, that we would see his glory, the glory that the Father had given him because he loved him "before the creation of the world" (John 17:24). Everlasting life means that there will be no more sin, no more sorrow, no more suffering. Scarcity and strife will cease. In Christ, evil will end. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. The healing of the nations will take place around the throne of the triune God. There will be no more night, because the Lord God will be our light. No more loneliness because the fully restoration of face-to-face fellowship with God will take place.

Skeptics may say this is way too good to be true, but this is the goodness we were made for. This is the home we yearn for. C. S. Lewis observed:

"We are very shy nowadays of even mentioning heaven. We are afraid of the jeer about 'pie in the sky,' and of being told that we are trying to 'escape' from the duty of making a happy world here and now into the dreams of a happy world elsewhere. But either there is a 'pie in the sky' or there is not. If there is not, then Christianity is false, for this doctrine is woven into its whole fabric. If there is, then this truth, like any other, must be faced, whether it is useful . . . or not. Again, we are afraid that heaven is a bribe..."¹⁰

To enter into the assurance of the psalmist, the expectation of the apostle, and the promise of the Christ is to lose our shyness about heaven and to live in the present in the light and life of our future home. To embrace this destiny is to experience eternal life, knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent.

A Retrospective

Praise be to the Lord,
for he showed me the wonders of his love
when I was in a city under siege.
In my alarm I said,
"I am cut off from your sight!"
Yet you heard my cry for mercy
when I called to you for help.
Love the Lord, all his faithful people!
The Lord preserves those who are true to him,
but the proud he pays back full.
Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the Lord.

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 145.

Psalm 31:21-24

David's testimony explains the intensity of his anguish and the certainty of his hope. He knows what it is like to live in a city under siege. He has felt trapped and cut off, hated by his enemies and abandoned by his friends. But now he is able to look back and praise the Lord for showing him "the wonders of his love." He can testify, "Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help" (Ps 31:22). Surely, the prophet Jeremiah was deeply encouraged to pray this psalm, because he knew first-hand the hopelessness of living in a city under siege. I wonder if he thought David wrote the psalm just for him. John Calvin wrote,

"Nothing is more difficult, when we see our faith derided by the whole world, than to direct our speech to God only, and to rest satisfied with this testimony which our conscience gives us, *that he is our God*. And certainly it is the undoubted proof of genuine faith, when, however fierce the waves are which beat against us, and however sore the assaults by which we are shaken, we hold fast this as a fixed principle, that we are constantly under the protection of God, and say to him freely, *You are our God*."¹¹

The psalm ends with an exhortation delivered as an exclamation. Without hesitancy and with great confidence, David declares, "Love the Lord, all his faithful people!" That's his bottom line. He has no doubt that the Lord preserves those who are true to him and put their trust in him. He challenges the faithful to be of good courage and to strengthen their heart.¹² This reason this exhortation is so powerful for us is because when our Savior quoted this psalm on the cross, "Father! Into your hands I commit my spirit," he was in the very act of giving himself up for our sins in order to redeem us, and to reconcile us to the Father. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Patrick Reardon writes,

"In this psalm, then, the voice of Christ becomes our voice: 'In You, O Lord, I put my trust, let me never be put to shame. Deliver me in Your righteousness. . . . You have redeemed me, Lord God of truth. . . . But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord; I say 'You are my God.' . . . Oh, how great is your goodness, which You have laid up for those who fear You, which You have prepared for those who trust in You.'"¹³

¹¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, 511.

¹² Ross, *Psalms*, 699.

¹³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 59.

