

A PSALM FOR STRESS

Psalm 31

Dr. George O. Wood

“A Psalm for Stress.” I’ll widely broaden the definition of stress. Actually when we reach Psalm 31 we are now three quarters of the way through the first division, the first of five divisions of the Psalter. It is in the first division of the psalms that we have the heaviest loading of Davidic psalms, psalms written by or ascribed to David. All the psalms in the first division—the first forty-one psalms—all but three are ascribed to David. The ones that are not ascribed to him are Psalm 1, which is the psalm of foundations. Psalm 2 is not ascribed to him but it is in the New Testament attributed to David by Peter in Acts 4. Then Psalm 33, which we haven’t come to yet is also not directly attributed to David.

This thirty-first psalm is such a popular psalm because it weaves together a number of themes, which in general describe how we feel and how we need to pray when we are in trouble. If you’ve not yet gotten into a great deal of trouble then Psalm 31 will probably not have a great deal of meaning to you. There are some aspects of conflict that I have not experienced or been involved in until recent times in my life. I see Psalm 31 in a whole different light as the result of some life experiences that I have more recently had.

I would not be so bold to suggest that this is a psalm to fit all occasions of trouble. But I call it a generic psalm for trouble. If you don’t know what psalm to turn to in a particular crisis, reach for the generic psalm. It is probably going to hit about 90 percent of the things we really get in a jam concerning. Whatever the particular problem we have this psalm gives us words to pour out our complaint to God. And also to gain confidence in God. I suggest that the reason God gave us the psalms is to know how to pray. I find that the psalms greatly enrich my prayer life.

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Within this particular psalm there are three categories of what might be called lament. That's an aspect of the psalms. Many psalms are complaining in nature. In fact more psalms have been of the lament variety of the thirty-one we've covered so far than any other kind of type of the Psalter. Within these kinds of laments—"Lord, I'm in deep circumstances; help me"—this psalm covers three specific kinds of problems we deal with.

Verses 1–8 involve a plea for protection. They reflect David in a time of potential danger physically from adversaries. The second thread of thought or lament is when he is very ill, verses 9–12. The third lament within this psalm is when his life has been menaced by those who have made false accusations against him, verses 13–18. When we hit verse 19 we wind up in a time of thanksgiving where there's a resolution of all these various elements of his need.

The background of this psalm is uncertain. That is we do not know what particular moment in David's life this psalm interfaces with. Its mood swings can be very pronounced. For example, in verse 8 David can say "You have set my feet in a spacious place." Then he can turn right around in verse 9 and say, "LORD, I am in distress." In one moment he appears to have a real resolution on his problems and says, "God, it's so wonderful. You've made space for me. I'm going to make it through. Thank You, Lord." Before almost he's drawn the next breath he's saying, "God, help. I'm in trouble."

One of the things I appreciate is that it reflects some of my own mood swings in praying. Take comfort if you're going through that. David shows us an example of that right; within the psalm he does the same thing.

Someone has suggested that this juxtaposition between feeling good and feeling bad is the way life really is. Guilt and forgiveness, misfortune and prosperity, enemies and escape from enemies

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come tumbling after one another in life. Therefore this psalm represents the struggles we go through, the ups and downs of life.

We know that this psalm has been a great encouragement to God's people through all of time.

We know that this psalm was on the Lord's mind as He hung on the cross. In fact, the words of verse 5 with some change constituted His last words before His death on the cross. "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Those words involved by Jesus on the cross are also the dying words of Martin Luther, John Knox, the martyrs Huss, Polycarp, and others. When is the right time to acknowledge that death is present and say the kind of thing that verse 5 says?

I. First the prayer to be delivered from impending trouble.

"In you, O 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. Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth. I hate those who cling to worthless idols; 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 handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place" (Psalm 31:1-8, NIV).

In these words David seems to be seeking assurance from impending danger. It does not appear in reading it that he is at that moment being fired upon. But he has a sense that there is something about to break upon him. He's got to get God's help in order to be saved from that danger which is coming his way. These verses therefore take up wilderness language which in David's earlier experience of his hiding out from Saul he had learned the importance of a physical place of isolation and safety. When he thought about getting out of danger he would immediately think of

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going to the wilderness which was always his escape path. You find the wilderness language coming again and again. For example look at refuge, rock of refuge, strong fortress, rock and fortress, freed from a trap.

When I think of safety I don't think in wilderness language. My metaphors of life when I've needed security don't relate to rocks. I don't remember hiding behind a rock for refuge.

What metaphors would we use? Mother's lap. Fireplace. Home movies. A great sense of security. Stuffed chair reading a book on a cold night. That's what the Lord is for me when I'm in trouble. Same that David had in mind maybe.

Can we, like David, take our places where we have found physical comfort and security and let them represent to us spiritual comfort and security?

When David is in this place of imminent danger he comes to this moment in verse 5, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Of course these are the words the Lord uses on the cross although there are two fundamentally different ways that the Lord used the words.

The first, the Lord adds a word to the phrase—"Father." You look through the Old Testament and you find almost no reference to God specifically addressed as "Father." Except in the universal sense of fatherhood. But the idea of personal father is absent. As you watch Jesus' life you see the perpetual manifestation of a personal relationship with God seen through the word "Father" which He encourages us to use. We may trust one at a time like that.

The second difference is that when David used the word he is using it to commit himself to God in order to escape from death. By the time he is done with that section, he has not been handed over to the enemy. His feet have been set in a wide place. So he meant it from the standpoint of "Lord, deliver me from death." But Jesus uses the words not to escape from death but He uses the words in death. It's a fundamentally different change.

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One of the great things that prayer brings in our life is confidence. Certainly as we pray with David these words, we find that in the opening moments he has asked, “Lord, You be my rock of refuge” (verse 2). He’s asking God that. But it isn’t but a moment more until he’s rephrasing it. No longer is he asking for God to be his refuge. He is saying, “Since You are my refuge” (verse 4).

The psalms help us to pray that when we recognize that when we open our lives to God we have the same thing. We at times begin our prayer with doubts. “Lord, are You really going to be present this time? You have been in the past. Are You going to be here this time?” It isn’t long that when we’re in prayer our own attitudes get vitally affected by our union with God.

There’s another change that occurs with David that prayer has done for him. In verse 4 he prays to be free from the trap (net) that is set for him. But by the time he has come to praying the words found in verse 8 he acknowledges that God has not handed him over to the enemy. His feet have not landed in a trap. But God has brought him to a spacious place.

The first thread is a plea for protection from impending trouble.

II. The second lament of the psalm or the second danger which David faced is a prayer for deliverance from bodily sickness.

Verses 9–12. “Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my 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; I am a dread to my friends—those who see me on the street flee from me. I am forgotten by them as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery” (NIV).

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Here of course are the words of David when he was literally undone. He has been afflicted with a disease that appears to be of some longstanding. It's been going on long enough that he can describe years of groaning. And he has become separated from his friends. He is relationally cut off. He is the contempt of his neighbors and a dread to his friends. If there is a long-term illness it does cut you off from people.

You don't go to the hospital to be visited by people. You go to get well. You go home and people get busy doing their thing and all of a sudden if you're sick for a long time how very real psychologically and spiritually are the words of David? When we're sick and spending a long time in bed we begin to feel worthless. Nobody cares anymore. Even my neighbors think I'm a walking plague. Self-esteem and self-worth are the twin problems of sickness. And paranoia begins to accompany a long-term illness. I think David must have had a tad of paranoia when he says, "I am a dread to my friends" (verse 11). Maybe there was reality to that but maybe too he was overreacting as we often do.

This particular section of the psalm closes on a very discouraging note. "I feel like a broken piece of pottery" (verse 12). What could anybody do with a broken piece of pottery? Pottery is important in the household in terms of daily use. What do you do with broken pottery? It can't hold anything. You can't drink from it. You can't wash from it. What's it good for? The only known use for broken pieces of pottery is how Job put it to use—scraping boils. David's comment is in the pits of depression. Not good for anything anymore.

That's why this psalm is such a good psalm for when we go through a long period of time like that. Thank the Lord the psalm doesn't end with verse 12. And neither does life end with verse 12. There are moments we feel like that.

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III. The third component that is added to David's trouble and stress is found in verses 13–18.

“For I hear the slander of many; there is terror on every side; they conspire against me and plot to take my life. But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and 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, O LORD, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave. Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous” (NIV). Here David is simply acknowledging that he has been the victim of a whispering campaign. Malicious things have been said about him which are not true. And which evidently people have come to believe as true and have cost him a great deal of personal travail and suffering.

There is no substitute for experience. It takes little bit of experience to realize that just because there's an accusation doesn't mean that there's any truth. People have differing motives for saying things. Some motives they may know. Some they may have no idea of why they're acting as they are. We could do so much in the body of Christ for one another if we'd learn to live by this rule. When you hear something about another person, rather than believing it, if it's negative.

I empathize with people of whom there has been slander. Maybe a life was not at stake. Maybe it was against our job or our reputation or our friendship. In such a time David again throws himself back on the Lord. He must find that God will provide the deliverance. All he really needs, he says, is for God to let His face shine upon him. Our way in handling that in our language would be to say, “God, keep smiling at me. If I know You're not frowning at me, it'll be ok. Let Your face shine on me.”

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Without ever being told how he gets resolution on these three crises—running from enemies, being deathly ill on a long-term basis, and having slanderous things spoken against him—he never gives us the answer that God brought. We don't know if it was an answer by process—gradually God brought him out of this. We don't know if it was an instantaneous miracle. We don't know that maybe the answer was in the fact that God rearranged David's mind in the course of praying so that maybe his external circumstances didn't change but his attitude toward them changed. We don't know how God answered the particular prayer. Except to know that the psalm had a fourth division to it. In addition to the three problems which he articulated.

IV. The fourth deliverance is a thanksgiving for God's gracious response.

“How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you [That's worthy thinking about for a moment], which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence you hide them from the intrigues of men; in your dwelling you keep them safe from accusing tongues. Praise be to the LORD, for he showed his wonderful love to me when I was in a besieged city. 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 saints! The LORD preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full. Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD” (Psalm 31:19–24, NIV).

I think anyone who has been delivered from the threefold cord of hurt which has been described in the first eighteen verses and who has remained with their faith intact feels compelled to give God thanks. That's what David does. God has been faithful to him even in those moments when he doubted Him.

“LORD, I'm cut off from Your sight” (verse 22). See again the mood swing. He had felt that way as he walked through this threefold cord of despair. But thank the Lord it wasn't the last word

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and it's never for us as well. God is faithful to us even in those moments when we feel like He's cut us off.

The end result of the experience is we reach out to encourage others. Notice how verse 23 is entirely different from the rest of the psalm. Up through the twenty-second verse, David is sort of praying to the Lord and not talking to other people. But when he gets to the end of the psalm now he's ready to talk to other people. "Love the LORD, all his saints!" When God has done something for us, and we know that He's given us assurance and walked with us through a moment of difficulty in our life, we're able to reach out and encourage people who are going through similar things. So David says that we can trust God and find the same consolation and help in God that he himself has found.

"Therefore be strong and take heart all you who hope in the LORD" (verse 24). God is with you.

There is a great deal of similarity between Psalm 23 and Psalm 31. Psalm 23 is likewise somewhat of a generic psalm. We use it in all occasions. Both Psalm 23 and Psalm 31 begin with a statement of confidence then go on and describe life's dark passages. Then after that they focus on the good that God renders following the trial and how we can be especially confident about the end. The bottom line is the same in both psalms. Trust God. Be not afraid.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we come to You tonight. We know again as we open Your Word that You don't send Your Word in vain. Lord, we believe that You even appoint Your Word to come to us at moments in our life that are special and unique. For some here this evening this psalm will be more than a teaching. More than something which is filed away for a rainy day. But it relates right now to what they walk through in this present moment. We receive this psalm if we're in those circumstances as a gift of grace from you to our own hearts to remind us that whether we are in

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danger or whether we are in illness or whether we are being maligned that we are not cut off from You. You care about us. You will bring us through. This will not be a trap that ensnares us. We've committed our way to You and You will set us in a large and safe place. Thank You for that, Lord. Thank You for teaching us how to live and how to pray through this psalm in Your Word. Thank You for your grace here with us tonight. In Your name we give thanks.