

## I'm Hanging by a Thread

Psalm 31

Studies in the Psalms #32

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I've said many times so far that as the Psalms express the whole range of our emotional life they are applicable to each and every one of us in many circumstances of our lives. I think we get that. Amen? I think we've been able to feel that as we've gone through. But let me show you how the Psalms are meant to be applied to all of life's circumstances. Here in Psalm 31 we have David lamenting and pleading with the Lord while he and his friends were in a war, besieged in a city (v. 21). Later in the Psalter there is an unnamed old saint who was nearing the end of his life in Psalm 71. What was he meditating on at the end of his life? Psalm 31. Go look it up and compare the opening of Psalm 31 with 71. After the prophet Jeremiah was beaten and imprisoned by Passhur the priest he complained to the Lord using some of the words of this Psalm (Jer. 20:10; cf. Ps. 31:13). While in the belly of the whale the prophet Jonah cried out with some of the words of Psalm (Jon. 2:4; cf. Ps. 31:22). Skipping ahead of the apostolic church, as Stephen lay dying having been stoned to a bloody pulp, he lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed in the words of Psalm 31:5, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Psalm

31, like all the Psalms, have a Holy Spirit elasticity. The Psalms are not rigidly to be understood merely in their own original context; they are meant to be prayed in personal ways across the ages by those whose lives are hanging by a thread.

And this brings us to our Lord Jesus as he hung on the cross, his life hanging by a thread. Do you recall what his last recorded words were just before death? “Father, into your your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).<sup>1</sup> And where did those words come from? Psalm 31:5. We also hear in this Psalm the plots against his life: **you take me out of the net they have hidden for me...I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life** (vv. 4, 13). We hear the false witnesses against him: **Let the lying lips be mute, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt** (v. 18). We hear of his friends abandoning him and his enemies mocking him: **Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel** (vv. 11–12). We hear what

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Derek Kidner for stimulating this section. *Psalms 1–72*, 130.

theologians have called the “wondrous exchange” (*mirifica commutatio*)<sup>2</sup>—when our sins were imputed to the sinless Jesus so that his righteousness could be imputed to the unrighteous: **For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away** (v. 10).<sup>3</sup>

Psalm 31 is for those who lives hang by a thread.

### **The Rawness of My Life**

I want you to feel the emotion of David as his life hung by a thread so that you, too, can express yourself to God in prayer when you feel like your life hangs by a thread. Psalm 31 expresses, first, *the rawness of my life*. Note again that in verse 21 David tells us the context of his prayer: **Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was in a besieged city**. He’s at war, his enemies surround the city, and he’s trying to find shelter. That brings his prayer in verse 1 into perspective: **in you, O LORD, do I take refuge**.

And it’s there that he feels schemed against and trapped: **you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge** (v. 4). It’s

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.2.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Patrick Henry Reardon for stimulating this section. *Christ in the Psalms*, 59–60.

there that he was full of emotional and psychological stress: **I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress**—the Hebrew is plural **distresses**—of my soul (v. 7). And again **be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress** (v. 9). It's there that this led to physical pain: **my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also** (v. 9). **For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away** (v. 10). The Holy Spirit didn't give us his Word to be a psychological handbook, but what David expresses is what we know as a psycho-somatic response. When we're anxious, when we're depressed, when we're sad it doesn't just affect our minds while we go on living "normal" life; no, as some of you know all too well it affects your body too. It's there in that city that David felt the backstabbing pain of so-called friends. Listen to this: **Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life** (vv. 11–13).

Those of us who are the only Christians in our families know this feeling. It was there in that city that David poured out raw emotion: **I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols** (v. 6). **O LORD, let me not be put to shame...let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol. Let the lying lips be mute, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt** (vv. 17–18).

Let me made two quick applications that we really could spend all day discussing. The first is this: following Jesus Christ is no guarantee of happiness or success in this life. The second it this: it's okay to be a hanging by a thread today feeling like your life is a total mess. Jesus died for messes like you!

### **The Reality of the My Lord**

And it's as I'm hanging by that proverbial thread that I know *the reality of my Lord*. Children, one of the biggest temptations you're going to face by other professing Christians as you get older is that if you're struggling then God must not love you. Some of us here today came out of churches where we heard that a lot. But another way that your generation expresses this is on social media where everyone always looks cool, happy, and blessed. But don't forget: everyone's faking it! I want you to always remember that I told

you this: what's real is not what you see on social media; what's real is that the King of the universe, Jesus Christ, underwent a life of suffering for you so that he could relate to you when you're suffering. Don't ever forget that.

Look at all the ways David expresses the reality of the Lord in the midst of real anguish and pain. **In you, O LORD, do I take refuge** (v. 1). **Be a rock of refuge for me**—literally a crack in a rock to hide<sup>4</sup>—**a strong fortress to save me!** (v. 2) **For you are my rock and my fortress** (v. 3). **You take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge** (v. 4). **Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed<sup>5</sup> me, O LORD, faithful God** (v. 5). It's interesting, isn't it, that when Jesus says this from the cross in Luke 23:46 he only says the first part of the verse: **into your hand I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God** was true later at his resurrection. But now because we are in Christ we get to say it all! As Peter said to suffering Christians in the first century, we get to entrust our souls to a faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19). We can say with the Psalm, **I trust in the LORD...I say, "You are my God" ...my times are in your hand** (vv. 6, 14, 15).

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<sup>4</sup> Motyer, 45 n3; 75 n21.

<sup>5</sup> *padah*, the price of redemption. Motyer, 65 n31; 75 n23.

“But Pastor, I’m doing that and look at my life today. It’s a mess; I’m a mess. How can I know God really loves me when I’m like this.” I know that’s how you and I often think. But as we’ve gone through the Psalms one thing that has stood out to me is that it’s the complete opposite. It’s those who struggle who are the really blessed ones. You are more able than those of us who don’t struggle and suffer as much to endure it. And God knows that. Look at verse 7: **I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul.** The Lord sees and knows your sorrows in his **steadfast love**. There’s that word again that speaks of the Lord’s personal faithfulness to his covenant promises to you (*chesed*).

### **The Response of My Love**

And it’s because of the Lord’s real love to me in the rawness of my life that the Psalm concludes calling for *the response of my love*. **Oh, how abundant is your goodness**—he’s saying while hanging on the thread—**which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind!** (v. 19) And so we say with David, **Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love**—there’s that word again [*chesed*]**—to me when I**

**was in a besieged city (v. 21). Love the LORD, all you his saints! Why?**

**The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who**

**acts in pride Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who**

**wait for the LORD! (vv. 23–24) As you feeling like you're hanging by a thread,**

**remember, it's the Lord who holds the thread! And he will lift you up.**