

Sing Psalm 31 to the tune of Psalm 103...

In a word:
Help!!!

I am abused –
My friends have abandoned me –
People are telling lies about me –
My life is in danger –
They are plotting against me!

And it is not just other people!
I have all sorts of bodily ailments as well!

But throughout the Psalm these cries for help are blended with affirmations of trust.

In recent weeks we have heard the derelict cry from the cross:
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Tonight we turn to the Psalm that answers Jesus’ cry:
“Into Your Hand I Commit My Spirit.”

There are many Psalms of the cross.
Psalm 22 – Why have you forsaken me?
Psalm 41 – the song of the betrayal
Psalm 69 – they gave me sour wine to drink
and many others.

But Psalm 31 is the last of the Psalms of the cross –
because Psalm 31 is the last Psalm that Jesus quotes.

Into your hand I commit my spirit.

If you would understand how to sing Psalm 31 –
then listen to how our Lord Jesus sang it first!

Jesus sang Psalm 31 as a song of confidence –
a song of hope from the midst of suffering:

God will not abandon me forever.
I have confidence that *in the end* God will redeem me from the pit.

Psalm 31 is a song for those who are still in the midst of bearing the cross.

In other words, it is a song for you,
who by the grace of God are denying yourself, taking up your cross,
and following Jesus,
because you see by faith that because God has delivered Jesus
and raised him up from death –
therefore he will raise you who have been united to Christ by faith!

You may notice that in your bulletins the outline has two points,
and yet the first point has two subdivisions of three points each.
I suppose some preachers might turn this into a three point sermon.
But Psalm 31 should not be divided into three points.
There are only two points here:

The first point, HELP! is reinforced by the doubling of the cry.
Verses 1-8 move from the plea for help,
to the reason for crying out to God,
to the occasion for the plea.
And then verses 9-18 follows the same basic pattern a second time.

And the final point, in verses 19-24, is that God has heard.
He does what he promises.

Hebrews 5:7-8 tells us how Jesus sang this:

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

Jesus is the one who cried out to the Father – and the Father heard him.
That is why Jesus could cry out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
And then shortly after that cry out, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

And in the final verses (21-24)
Jesus turns to address us –
and in the same language that he had used in his lament at the beginning,
he now speaks words of comfort to us.

Because when God hears the prayer of his anointed –
when God hears the cries of the Son of David,
then our Lord Jesus Christ assures us from his heavenly throne –
that because the LORD has heard him when *he* was besieged by his foes,
therefore we may have confidence that God will hear us
when we cry to him in Jesus name.

1. Help! O LORD, My Refuge (v1-18)

a. Rescue Me, O LORD (v1-2)

*31:1 In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me!*

2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily!

Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!

Psalm 31 begins with a cry for help.

I take refuge in you!

The theme of refuge is important in the Psalms – and particularly here.

Because my enemies are closing in.

The city is besieged (v21),

and I have nowhere else to turn.

We live in a day when violence is something that we have put at a safe distance –
at least, we convince ourselves of that!

We see violence in the movies and we think that we understand what it is.

That is like saying that because you weep over the misfortune of a character in a movie
that you have shown compassion.

Augustine comments on this –

that we do not like to weep in reality,

but we don't mind (indeed some of really enjoy) a good cry over a movie or play.

Why is this?

Because it makes us think that we are compassionate people.

But in reality we have not shown compassion!

Because real compassion helps real people in their real needs.

We do the same thing with violence.

We think that because we watched "Saving Private Ryan"

that now we have a "realistic" sense of what war is like.

Just ask anyone who has really been in a war!

They will tell you what "a rock refuge" or "a strong fortress" means!

Or ask the newsman that stood next to the little girl trapped in the rubble in Haiti –

and could barely keep his sentences coherent as he tried to report over her cries!

Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily!

In your righteousness deliver me!

But having issued his plea for help

David explains why:

b. Because You Are My Rock and Redeemer (v3-5)

3 For you are my rock and my fortress;

and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;

*4 you take me out of the net [or perhaps, “you deliver me from the net”] they have hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.*

The heart of the problem is that my enemies are hunting me.

They have laid traps – they have hidden their nets –
so that they can ensnare me.

And so the Psalmist prays not only for deliverance from that net (v4)
but also for his constant need for protection and refuge in God.

5 Into your hand I commit my spirit;

you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

What does he mean?

If you *have* redeemed me,
then why am I worried about being ensnared?

This is sometimes referred to as a “prophetic perfect.”

It is a statement about the future –
but his confidence in God is such
that he can speak as though it has already happened.

c. And You Have Not Delivered Me to My Enemies (v6-8)

6 I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,

but I trust in the Lord.

Now we hear something about these enemies who are pursuing him.

They are idolaters.

But I trust in the Lord.

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,

8 and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;

you have set my feet in a broad place.

The prophetic perfect of verse 5 now receives a fuller statement of confidence.

In spite of my affliction and distress –
in spite of the fact that I am hanging on the cross!

Into your hand I commit my spirit.
You have set my feet in a broad place.
The *very real* distress of my current situation
must be seen in the light of the salvation of the LORD for which I wait.

And the root of this confidence is found in God's *hesed* – his steadfast love (v5) –
his covenant faithfulness.
God will be loyal to his promises.
He will stand by his word.

Verse 8, with its confidence and trust, then continues back to the situation:

a. Be Gracious to Me, O LORD (v9-10)

*9 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.*
*10 For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my iniquity,
and my bones waste away.*

Once again the Psalmist is crying out for mercy.
Grief and sorrow characterize my life.
And its my own fault!
My strength fails because of my iniquity.

It is not just what *others* have done to me.
I cannot blame others for my situation.
This is not merely “suffering” – it is also guilt.
While my enemies are making life miserable for me,
all this has happened because of my sin.

Too often we assume that grief, sorrow and depression are problems to be fixed.
And we have reached the point in our society
where we can “fix” these problems with medication.
I'm not saying that medication is always wrong –
but we do need to remember that grief and sorrow are part of our fallen condition.
The first question for us as we are dealing with depression and sorrow
is the question of where we are looking.
Are we looking at ourselves and our own condition,
or are we turning our eyes to the living God?

In the case of the Psalmist, he first turns to look at his enemies:

b. Because My Enemies Have Plotted Against Me (v11-13)

*11 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.*

*12 I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.*

*13 For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.*

Again the Psalmist looks around him – and when he looks around him
he sees terror on every side.

The world, the flesh and the devil conspire against me.

c. And I Trust in You to Rescue Me (v14-18)

*14 But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”*

Calvin says on this verse,

“He was indeed sunk in the darkness of sorrow and in dreadful affliction,
yet the hidden light of faith still glimmered inwardly in his heart;
he sighed under his heavy load of trial,
yet he still had strength left to call upon God. . .
there is nothing more difficult, when we see our faith despised by the whole world,
than to direct our language to God alone,
and to rest on the testimony of our conscience that ‘he is our God’”.

And yet this is what we must do!

*15 My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!*

*16 Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!*

Again the confidence of the Psalmist is found in God’s steadfast love (v16)

Make your face shine on your servant.
He is asking for God’s blessing
(The LORD make his face to shine upon you...)

*17 O Lord, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon you;
let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol.*

*18 Let the lying lips be mute,
which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt.*

We tend not to think in terms of “shame” any more.
But shame and honor are central to biblical modes of thinking.

Verses 19-20 then move us to the Psalmist’s second point:

2. The LORD Preserves the Faithful (v19-24)
a. How Abundant Is Your Goodness (v19-20)

*19 Oh, how abundant is your goodness,
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!*

*20 In the cover of your presence you hide them
from the plots of men;
you store them in your shelter
from the strife of tongues.*

This is still direct address to God –
but no longer is it a petition.
No longer is it even the “prophetic perfect” –
rather, this is praise to God for his great and wondrous works.
The goodness which God has stored up for those who fear him –
the goodness he has worked for those who take refuge in him.

Many have wondered what could have triggered this transition.
Some have suggested that maybe when this was sung in the temple,
the priest would read or recount God’s wondrous deeds in redemption.

That is possible, but not necessary.

I tend to be wary of assuming too much about the context or usage
(since we don’t have evidence one way or t’ other).

But as we look at our situation –
as we look at the terror that surrounds us on every side –
we *should* also remember God’s abundant goodness.

Certainly our Lord Jesus Christ did –
as he entrusted himself to his Father,
and committed his spirit to his hands.

And that is why the Psalmist then blesses the LORD:

b. Because You Heard the Voice of My Pleas for Mercy (v21-22)

*21 Blessed be the Lord,
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was in a besieged city.
22 I had said in my alarm,
“I am cut off from your sight.”
But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy
when I cried to you for help.*

This final prayer has all sorts of echoes with the first part of the Psalm –
I cried out – and the LORD heard.

c. So Love the LORD and Take Courage (v23-24)

*23 Love the Lord, all you his saints!
The Lord preserves the faithful
but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.
24 Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord!*

Hengstenberg says, “After the Psalmist had ended matters with God,
he turns round to his brethren in the faith,
for the purpose of setting before them the lesson to be drawn
from the great drama which had been acted before their eyes” (p. 508).

Kraus rightly says, “According to Luke 23:46, it [v. 5] is the prayer of Jesus as he dies on the cross. But the trusting self-surrender is controlled by the certainty that Yahweh has not only looked upon and taken note of the entire distress-ridden, abused, and persecuted life, but has also accepted it (v. 7)” (p. 365).