

Psalm 31: How to Delight in God When Life is Hard
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Introduction

I think one of the most brilliant characters in English literature is a donkey. Do you know who Eeyore is? That imaginary donkey friend of Winnie the Pooh. Eeyore is splendid because he is never happy. He has a remarkable gift of finding something wrong with everything. He trods through life with a cloud of gloom over his head and the constant anticipation of whatever could wrong, will go wrong. Brilliant!

“Thanks for noticing.”

Are you an Eeyore? I do not think you should be if you are a Christian. We are beginning a new preaching series here today. We just finished preaching through the

Our church motto is — Delighting in God, to the glory of God, for the good of all people. It is the reason we think we are on the planet. So I wanted to start with Psalm 31 in order to help us see that Delight in God is not dependent on our circumstances.

Let’s be honest, Covid was a new challenge to this commitment. It brought with it all kinds of things we have not had to deal with before. And perhaps tempted us to be angry, discouraged, anxious or depressed. Not happy. Not rejoicing. Not full of delight in God.

If that was you, then all the more here is a Psalm to teach you and help you. How to be happy in God when life stinks. How to **not** be an Eeyore Christian. The Psalm itself proceeds in two parts, two variations on this one theme of delight in God in difficult times.

PART ONE (verses 1-8)

Notice how this Psalm begins. David writes an inscription. *To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.* By dedicating this Psalm to the CHOIR master, David signalled it was to be sung in the

corporate worship of God. That is important to notice if you think all that should be sung in churches is the happy stuff.

Here is a song for corporate worship that includes lament, pleading and deep sorrow... And delight. And that is just one of the reasons we sing the Psalms.

How do you delight in God when you are getting squeezed by life's troubles?

I. Declare Your Delight

*In you, O LORD, do I take **refuge** ;
let me never be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me!
Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily!
Be a **rock** of refuge for me,
a strong **fortress** to save me!*

There is much to notice in these first two verses. Let's start with the words, *refuge*, *fortress* and *rock*.

Refuge

The word *refuge* appears twice. The **first** time it translates a Hebrew word that speaks of "turning aside to find shelter," like running under a park pavilion in the pouring rain. A place of safety. The **second** time, when David tells the Lord to BE his refuge, he uses a word that describes something like Masada, that mountain stronghold in Israel. A kind of impregnable fortress. So David says to the Lord, be that for me. A place of top security.

Fortress

When he tells God to be his "strong fortress" at the end of verse 2, he uses yet another word for something like the "protected high ground" where a people is safe from raiding armies.

KIDS:

"I'm the king of the castle, you're the dirty rascal!
And you stand on the hill or mound of sand or whatever.
This is a kind of strong fortress.

Rock

In verse three, he will tell God that He is his “rock.”

When I was a kid, people bought pet rocks. This was marketing genius! And a profound waste of money. David is not comparing God to a stone. Not even a big stone. This is a technical term... it means a cleft in the cliff face or crag. Cut out in the rock. The kind of place David hid when he was on the run from Saul. A cave. In verses 3-4 he repeats all three...

*For you are my **rock** and my **fortress**;
and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;
you take me out of the net they have hidden for me,
for you are my **refuge** .*

I am pointing this out in case you ever been hiking. When I was a boy scout, we were taken on a 30km weekend hike. In other words, misery. And sure enough, with our 50-pound packs, it started to rain. It rained all weekend. I cannot tell you how nice it was to finally get in my father's car at the end of the hike. Out of the rain, into the heat! Exhausted. I am sure I slept for days. This is the concept David is getting at when he speaks of God being his refuge, fortress and rock. He is safe, secure and happy in God.

Are you happy in **your** refuge? Is a stronghold or fortress a good place to be when the enemy attacks? You bet it is!

And by telling God that HE is his refuge — David is making a statement about *pleasure*. You are my delight, Lord. You are my safety and security, but more than this, You are where I want to be. With You.

And people that delight in God like this, they know how to pray the truth. To leverage what God has revealed about Himself, against Him. When David calls on God to act according to HIS (God's) righteousness, He is leveraging revelation. This is the best way to pray, Christian. Leverage revelation. God has revealed things about Himself... call Him to act on what He has said.

- You told me You were my refuge. Be my refuge.
- You told me You were my fortress. Be my fortress.
- You told me You were my deliverer. Be my deliverer.

Christians who are delighting in God have no problem praying this way. I would argue, God Himself *rejoices* when we pray this way. Because we are taking Him at His

word... otherwise known as exercising faith. We are choosing to believe that what God has told us about Himself is true. We are choosing to delight in Him. To treasure Him above everything else.

With all of this soaring confidence in God, it is no wonder David exclaims,

*Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.*

David has been redeemed by God. Therefore, God will not let him be destroyed. He commits his entire self to the mighty hand of His rock, fortress and stronghold. God Himself.

Later on he writes, *"My times are in YOUR hand."* He is absolutely certain he is immortal until the Lord decides to take him home. Christians who understand this, who have this happy confidence in God, pray with **IMPERATIVES**. "Just God please just be with me just..."

No. Look at what David says...

- Deliver
- Incline your ear
- Be my rock
- Save me
- Lead me
- Guide me
- Take me out of the trap of my enemies.
- Don't let me put to shame

Are you an imperative-praying Christian? If you are not, it might be because your delight in God has been clouded and disrupted by your circumstances.

What is an idol? Anything we worship other than the real God. All we know so far in this Psalm is that David has enemies who have set a trap for him. He faced many such traps in his lifetime. We will see more about this in a moment. But, here, notice what David does when he hears of this latest attempt to get him to fail. He leans in to God. Not idols...

II. Affirm your allegiance

I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,

but I trust in the LORD.

When David first escaped from Saul, it was actually with the help of an idol. David's wife used his household idol for the only thing it was good for — a lump in the bed.

1 Samuel 19:13-14 [13] Michal took an image and laid it on the bed and put a pillow

of goats' hair at its head and covered it with the clothes. [14] And when Saul sent

messengers to take David, she said, "He is sick."

David got away, but not because that idol saved his life. David escaped because God was his refuge. And David learned through the years that all idolatry was folly.

"Worthless idols" could be translated something like, "vain breaths." That which is insubstantial, meaningless, a mere vapour... appearing like something when it is nothing.

You know... your phone.

- Do you bow down to it?
- Does it control your decisions?
- Do you give it your money?

A phone can be an idol if we are not careful. But you cannot delight in — find your soul's happiness in — a phone. It is a worthless idol. A vain breath. David is a luddite. He doesn't own a phone. David seeks his delight in God alone.

*[6] I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
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 man who is saying that he chooses to rejoice and be glad is the same man who finds his life getting strangled by his afflictions.

David uses a bunch of words here that make the reader feel like he is in one of those weird movies where the walls of the hallway close in on the actors. He is afflicted and distressed. He is living an oppressed life. Pushed down and in from every side.

If you have an enemy at work... or worse, at home... you can relate to this feeling. Your stomach tenses, your teeth clench, you are getting crushed by your oppressor. But David tells us that in the midst of all of this, he is *happy*.

[7] I will rejoice and be glad

How? Why? Because God has seen him. God knows his troubles. How did God know? Well, he is sovereign, yes. But, I think David is saying, "God knows *because I have told him*. I believe he hears my prayers!"

"I have told you all about my troubles and trials. And you picked my soul out of the crushing weight of it all and set me down in a wide open field. A broad place."

Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison. Joseph trusted God in the pit. A man can be in the worst of straits and be full of joy. Because his delight is not dependent on his outward circumstances, but his inward connection to his God. God might even keep bringing these circumstances into your short life to help you taste and see that He is good. So that you can learn to rejoice and be glad in His HSD... His steadfast love. After all, it is hard to know something is *steadfast* unless it is tested. David looks at all his awful circumstances and declares they have elevated his joy in God.

I was listening to Yo Yo Ma's wonderful interpretation of Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suite while I worked on this sermon. It flows in six parts, each a variation on the other. As I mentioned earlier, this Psalm flows in **two** parts. The second is a variation of the first. And that variation adds meaning and clarity to what he has already said.

PART TWO

III. Lament your Losses

*[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.

He rejoices AND he laments. You might wonder how two things, that seem like opposites, can be true at the same time? Well, just live long enough and you shall see. You know one of the things that is interesting about *lament* as a form of speech is that it is directed at God. It is not moaning to the stars or grumbling at your neighbours. Lament is a formal expression of grief to the One Person who can do something about what He hears. This is not one of the inscribed Psalms that gives lots of details. There is no introductory comment that says, "David wrote this while such and such was happening."

- You will find that in Psalm 30 — "A song at the dedication of the temple."
- Or, Psalm 3, "When he fled from Absalom his son."

This Psalm is more general, likely because so much of David's life was taken up with trouble. The guy who killed Goliath also spent 8 years on the run, unjustly accused of being a traitor, watched his own son attempt to usurp his throne, had children die, witnessed thousands of his citizens die as a result of his arrogance. His was not a perfect life. So, he acknowledges his own sins in his sufferings. I don't know about you, but I can relate to this verse.

*[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.*

David was a realist. Life, even though he was delighting in God, was also nothing short of 70 years of sorrow and sighings. Were it not for the grace of God, we would sink under the weight of our own guilt and unrighteousness. But added to this burden is the weight of everyone else's sins against us!

*[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.*

Were not life hard enough, Satan invented Discernment Bloggers. David can see the writing on the wall. He knows what people are whispering behind his back. They are plotting ways to get him out of the way.

Sometimes I read autobiographies of great leaders who say things like, "I knew the enemy would do this, so I did that. I am brilliant." And, I always think to myself, "Really?" Are people really that smart and devious? And right? I cannot relate! Half the time as elders I feel like the Lord just leads us along and we are the happy recipients of His kind providence. But, if you think we are some amazing back room schemers and plotters! Ha! I want to stand with David. I want to lead a simple life. A life that deals with the plain truth of the matter.

When you live that way, you will lament. And rejoice. And pray...

IV. Leverage His Law

*[14] But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."*

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

There is a lovely prayer.

You are my God. Not Molech. Not Baal. Not Buddha. And not my phone. My times are in YOUR hand. So rescue me, Rescuer! Have you ever prayed God's Word? We spoke about this a little just a few minutes ago, and here it comes again.

David leverages **revelation** again, by leaning in to the Benediction God supplied Aaron to speak to Israel...

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

Numbers 6:

[24] The LORD bless you and keep you;

[25] the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

Benedictions are not spells cast on the followers of YHWH. They are wish-prayers that God gives us to speak to one another in order to increase our confidence in Him.

God wrote this benediction in Numbers 6. It is revelation. (Isn't that kind of Him!) And David takes the words of Numbers 6:25 and asks God to come through on His promise.

My priests have been speaking "the LORD make his face to shine upon you" to me for years... so Lord, do that!

[16] Make your face shine on your servant;

And then he leverages God's **character**.

"You are the One who said the wicked would not prosper. Well, it is wicked men who are attacking me. Deal with them, Lord! Keep your promise!"

*[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.*

David understands who he is and the promises God had made to him. This is vital to see. Those promises were not yet fulfilled. He was not sitting at ease on his throne with peace all around him. Yet, that is what the Lord has promised him. So, David pleads with God to deal with the wicked, the liars, the insolent, the proud and contemptuous. And he is sure God will! And he is sure of this because he is a man who chooses to find his happiness in God Himself. But not alone... This takes us to the ending crescendo of the Psalm.

V. Fortify your friends

This man with so many enemies, who is getting squeezed on every side by whispering traitors, who has to endure lies, affliction and trouble... this man has the audacity to look us in the eye and say, "Delight in God, **brother!** Delight in God, **sister!**" Delight is not a solo project. God gives us each other to help each other elevate our delight in Him. Your job as a member of this church is to help the other members of this church delight in God. It is as if David turns to you now and says, "Let me give you three solid reasons why you should delight in God — even when your life is hard."

Pay attention, Christian, here are three things to tell each other. A lot!

A. He will protect you

*[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.*

Notice that David moves from talking about **his** experience to **our** experience. He is speaking about **ALL** who delight in God. **All** those who take refuge in Him. God does things for **THEM**. The first thing He does is store up Goodness for them. It would be fine enough if all God did was pile a bunch of goodness into His eternity that one day would be all ours... but David says that the Lord also WORKS (or displays, causes to be seen) this goodness IN THE SIGHT of all. That means now. In this life, in real time. And the way God does this is by answering the first prayer of this Psalm. Do you remember what it was?

*[2] Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily!
Be a rock of refuge for me,
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a strong fortress to save me!*

God hides them in His presence. He tucks them away in His impregnable shelter. He cuts off all the plots and whisperings of others and gives them Himself. Again, this is not a promise to be spared trials. It is a promise to be given God in your trials.

In one of my greatest trials, I found it a constant battle to come to the Lord with my worries and concerns. I was so afraid. And so worried about messing up. I was battered by the plots and lies of others. But I found that as I gave all my worries to the Lord and cried out to Him... He calmed my heart and hid me in His love. This takes us to the

second reason you should delight in God. The second thing you should remind one another...

B. He loves you

*[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.
What kinds of things have you said in your alarm?*

This is a particularly good question to ask tween girls.

- "You all hate me!"
- "Why are you making my life so miserable!?"
- "I will never have any friends."

For the record, tween boys would be saying the same thing if they knew how to formulate full sentences. We all say things in our alarm that are over the top and false. Have you ever been so pressed and distressed by your circumstances that you thought or said, "*God has forgotten about me!*" That is what David admits. Things got so hard he actually thought the Lord had shut him out.

*[22] I had said in my alarm,
"I am cut off from your sight."*

But that was what he *felt*. Not what was *true*. "*A wise person interprets their circumstances by God's character. They never interpret God's character by their circumstances.*" Maybe it was after he spoke in his alarm that David came to his senses?

And instead of despairing, he started praying. Instead of losing heart, he started launching petitions. There is a part of God's great love we will only experience as we rely on Him and delight in Him in the worst of our trials. David pleaded with God and God wondrously displayed his love.

Perhaps the Lord has you in the thick of troubles *today* so that He can show you the depth of His love *tomorrow*. It is good to delight in God when your city is **blessed**. It is perhaps even better to delight in God when your city is **besieged**.

*[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.*

Not only will this God of yours protect you, and love you, brother. He will give you strength to endure the hardship. This is what we tell each other again and again so that we delight in Him.

C. He will strengthen you

*[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!*

One must pay careful attention to what promise is given here.

- It is not a promise to have all your troubles erased.
- It is a promise to be preserved and strengthened through those trials.

God will take care of the justice on your enemies. In the meantime, He will make sure you have the courage to move forward.

You know what courage is, right? The inner fortitude to choose/do what is right, even when it looks like doing so might lead to terrible loss. Courage is not the absence of fear or misgivings. It is the decision to act in obedience to God in spite of them. And that is why this Psalm is so important.

Conclusion

This is a popular Psalm. Both Jonah and Jeremiah quoted this Psalm. They were not the only ones. A third Man quoted it as well... We have already seen lots of hints of this third Person. Look at..

Psalm 31:7

*because you have seen my affliction;
you have known the distress of my soul*

Psalm 31:9

*my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.*

We know of a Man who suffered greatly in a dark garden. Who prayed in deep distress of soul to His heavenly Father as His body sweat great drops of blood. Look at...

Psalm 31:13

*as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.*

We know a Man who endured the lies of His enemies as they falsely accused Him of sin and secretly plotted to murder Him, even though He was innocent. Look at..

Psalm 31:22

*[22] I had said in my alarm,
"I am cut off from your sight."*

We know a man who **never** said this or anything in His alarm, but who **was** cut off from God's sight as He endured the penalty for sins He never committed. Look at...

Psalm 31:5

[5] Into your hand I commit my spirit;

We know a Man who spoke these very words while hanging on a Roman cross. Not as an expression of defeat, resignation or surrender... but just as David spoke them... as an expression of total confidence in His Father...only more so. When David wrote these words, he was not expecting to die, he was expecting God to intervene in his case and deliver him. When the Greater David, our Lord Jesus took those same words to Himself, He elevated their significance to a new and greater level. He knew in just a moment He

would give up His spirit and die. But He quoted the words of Psalm 31 so all of us would know His untouchable confidence that His Father would raise Him from the dead to never-ending life. Not just one rescue from one trial, but the great rescue from all trials. He breathed His last and He was in Paradise. And that same Lord Jesus offers the same eternal life and uninterrupted delight to all whose souls are hidden in His.

- Have you repented from your sins?
- Have you put all your hope for eternal life in Jesus?

O Friend, there is no way to be happy in God if you are not right with His Son. And the only way to be right with His Son, is to renounce all the things you have said and done that he calls *sin* — every lie, every lustful thought, every harsh word. And to identify yourself so closely to Jesus that you can say, “I believe what He did on the cross was sufficient for me.”

May God graciously work in your life right now to save you from the hell your sins deserve. Repent. Believe. And live! And Christian, may God lift you up from your Eeyore ways... to be one who delights in Him to His glory. Even in the worst of your days. David is the best example of the anti-Eeyore! He chose to delight in God when life was hardest. Just as our Lord Jesus looked to His Father. Brother, Sister, you can have this same delight. The same confidence in God of the many who have lived before us whose faith was in Jesus Christ.

As they led that early Czech reformer John Hus to his death, the religious leaders of the day told him, “We devote thy soul to the infernal demons.” To which Hus replied, “But I commit my spirit into Thy hands, O Lord Jesus Christ...” Sure, his body was burned at the stake. But the moment he died his soul was in the presence of its chief delight. Forever. May God ensure that will be the case for each of us.