



Psalm 31 - Prayer and Praise for Deliverance from Enemies

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

Introduction

This is a lament that seeks help from God for a faithful person worn out with trouble and beset by enemies who want to do him harm. It is not hard to connect many of the particulars with the life of David, the author; but the wording is general enough for all kinds of people to find themselves in this prayer.

Psalm 31:1-2 - Hear My Prayer.

The opening words 'I seek refuge' exhibit dependence and trust, as confirmed in 5:11, 16:1 and 25:20; this is the kind of person who may seek God's help. God's righteousness here is his faithfulness to his promises; it is grounds for assurance, not for fear. The images of rock and fortress, using several different words, are common ways of describing God. Psalm 71:1-3 is very similar.

- ¹ In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

Psalm 31:1

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge. This psalm of David begins in a similar way to many of his other psalms, with a declaration of trust in God in a time of trouble. The precise nature or time of the trouble is not known, other than it severely afflicted David (vv.9-13) and made him despair of life. Nevertheless, David proclaimed his trust in the Lord throughout this time of testing.

Do not let me ever be put to shame. David's bold declaration of trust showed that he was not ashamed to call upon the Lord. He considered it appropriate that

God answer him by not allowing his servant to ever be ashamed before his enemies and adversaries.

In your righteousness deliver me. Because David trusted in God, he asked God to act righteously on his behalf, and to deliver him. He asked that the righteousness of God work on his behalf: <<*Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me*>> (Psalm 5:8).

Early in the 16th Century, a German monk and seminary professor named Martin Luther taught through the psalms, verse by verse, at the University of Wittenberg. In his teaching he came upon this statement in v.1, which is v.2 in German. The passage confused him; how could God's righteousness deliver him? The righteousness of God, his great justice, could only condemn him to hell as a righteous punishment for his sins. One night up in a tower in the monastery, Luther thought about this passage in the psalms and also read: <<*For in it [i.e. the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'*>> (Romans 1:17). Luther said he thought about this day and night until he finally understood what the righteousness of God revealed by the Gospel is. It is not speaking of the holy righteousness of God that condemns the guilty sinner, but of the God-kind of righteousness that is given to the sinner who puts their trust in Jesus Christ. Luther said of this experience: "I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Therefore I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise . . . This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven." Martin Luther was born again, and the reformation began in his heart. One great Lutheran scholar said this was 'The happiest day in Luther's life.'

2 Incline your ear to me;
 rescue me speedily.

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

Psalm 31:2

Incline your ear, rescue me, be a rock. In the previous verse David established the basis of God's rescue: deliver me in your righteousness. David then called on God to act righteously on behalf of his needy servant, to rescue and protect David: <<*my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my saviour; you save me from violence*>> (2 Samuel 22:3).

Psalm 31:3-8 - You Have Always Kept Me Safe in the Past.

The psalm recounts previous experiences of calling for help in time of trouble. God has shown himself a reliable deliverer; thus the singer expects always to rejoice and be glad (v.7).

- ³ You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
⁴ take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

Psalm 31:3-4

You are indeed my rock and my fortress. David acknowledges that God fulfils all that David needs and desires.

For your name's sake lead me and guide me. David did not ask for rescue because he was so good, but for the sake of God's holy name. David believed that if God would lead and guide him, it would bring honour to God and his name.

Take me out of the net that is hidden for me. David knew his enemies wanted to trap and destroy him: <<*A rope is hid for them in the ground, a trap for them in the path*>> (Job 18:10), but that God could rescue him even from clever and determined enemies.

- ⁵ Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.
⁶ You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the Lord.
⁷ I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have taken heed of my adversities,
⁸ and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

Psalm 31:5-8

Into your hand I commit my spirit. David asked to be delivered from his enemies and their snares, but not so he could live for himself. He utterly cast himself upon God, committing the deepest part of himself to God. In total surrender and submission to his Father, Jesus uses these words on the Cross in Luke 23:46; he dies as the innocent sufferer, trusting in God for vindication; for confirmation refer to the comments made on Psalm 22. Yet this committal of the soul unto God the Father is not reserved for David and the Son of David alone. Stephen, the first martyr of the church, had the idea of this text in mind with his final words: <<***While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'***>> (Acts 7:59).

You have redeemed me. David understood that his surrender to God was appropriate because it was God who had redeemed him. He belonged to God both in gratitude for rescue, and in recognition that God had purchased him. In the OT the word redeem, *pada*, is seldom used of atonement: it is mostly means to rescue or ransom out of trouble.

O Lord, faithful God. This is a second reason why it was good and appropriate for David to surrender his life to God, because God is the God of truth, and the truth demanded David's service and allegiance. David cared about what was true, as did Jesus: <<***Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'***>> (John 8:31-32).

You hate is a strong term, stressing the decisive way in which the faithful reject all sympathy with the wicked. It is possible for God to hate those who oppose him, as in Psalm 5:5 and 11:5, and at the same time to be good or kind to all: <<***The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made***>> (Psalm 145:9); therefore, it must be desirable for the faithful to do the same.

I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love. David's surrender and submission to God did not produce misery, he was happy and joyful. Much of this was because his heart overflowed with gratitude, thinking of all God had done for him.

You have seen my affliction. David was happy because he knew God did not ignore him in his time of trouble. Jesus turned to God in his anguish: <<***In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground***>> (Luke 22:44).

You have taken heed of my adversities. David was happy because he knew God had deep, substantial knowledge of David, even into the depths of his soul, in his seasons of adversities.

And have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy. David was happy because he knew that God answered or would answer his prayer to be delivered from the snares of his enemies.

You have set my feet in a broad place. David was happy for God did not only preserve him from enemies, but also set David in a place of safety and security.

Psalm 31:9-13 - I Am in Distress Again.

After looking back over the past, the song turns to the present, a situation of distress. There is grief, sorrow, and sighing because of the adversaries who were plotting to take David's life.

⁹ Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;

my eye wastes away from grief,

my soul and body also.

¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow,

and my years with sighing;

my strength fails because of my misery,

and my bones waste away.

¹¹ I am the scorn of all my adversaries,

a horror to my neighbours,

an object of dread to my acquaintances;

those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹² I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;

I have become like a broken vessel.

¹³ For I hear the whispering of many —

terror all around! —

as they scheme together against me,

as they plot to take my life.

Psalm 31:9-13

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress. The previous section of this psalm ended with calm trust and gratitude to God. Here David once again took up the lament, showing that both rest and adversity come to God's people in seasons. Yet in his trouble, David looks again to the Lord: <<*Answer me when I call, O God of*

my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer>> (Psalm 4:1).

My eye wastes away from grief. David described his pitiful condition in terms that seem to be taken from the Book of Job. His affliction was:

- Physical (my strength fails, my bones waste away). The poetical expression need not imply that he is physically sick but could mean that his mental anguish has sapped his physical strength, to a point approaching death.
- Emotional (my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing, terror all around!).
- Social (I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbours, an object of dread to my acquaintances).
- Mortal (they scheme together against me, they plot to take my life).
- Spiritual (because of my misery).

My soul and body also. Literally, body is belly, i.e. my bowels contained in my belly; which was the seat of the affections, and fountains of support and nourishment to the whole body. Thus the whole man, both soul and body, inside and outside, are consumed.

Because of my misery. This interprets the distress as God's chastisement; but if it is that, then the purposes of God, and not of the evildoers, will prevail.

I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. With poetry and power, David expressed how complete his difficulty was.

I am the scorn of all my adversaries. If anyone strives after patience and humility, he is a hypocrite. If he allows himself in the pleasures of this world, he is a glutton. If he seeks justice, he is impatient; if he does not seek it, he is a fool. If he is prudent, he is stingy; if he makes others happy, he is dissolute. If he gives himself up to prayer, he is vainglorious. And this is the great loss of the church, that by means like these many are held back from goodness which the psalmist lamenting says, 'I became a reproof among all mine enemies.'

For I hear the whispering of many – terror all around! – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. David seemed almost overwhelmed by the dangers around him: <<***Terrors frighten them on every side, and chase them at their heels***>> (Job 18:11), and: <<***Do not go out into the field, or walk on the road; for the enemy has a sword, terror is on every side***>> (Jeremiah 6:25), but almost and not completely.

Psalm 31:14-18 - My Times Are in Your Hand.

This section expresses trust in the Lord amid the present distress. This trust is built not only on the experiences recounted in vv.3-8 but also on the promises of the covenant: e.g. <<***let your face shine***>> (v.16), which is taken from Numbers 6:25.

As usual in the psalms, people are designated by their stance toward God: the righteous (v.18) are those who trust in God, believe his word, and seek to please him; the wicked (v.17), who are commonly everyone else besides the righteous, are here those who seek to destroy the faithful.

14 But I trust in you, O Lord;

I say, 'You are my God.'

15 My times are in your hand;

deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

16 Let your face shine upon your servant;

save me in your steadfast love.

17 Do not let me be put to shame, O Lord,

for I call on you;

let the wicked be put to shame;

let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.

18 Let the lying lips be stilled

that speak insolently against the righteous

with pride and contempt.

Psalm 31:14-18

But I trust in you, O Lord. However great David's troubles were, his trust in God was even greater. He took careful inventory of his crisis, but would not dwell on it. He understood that Yahweh was his God, i.e. You are my God, and therefore greater than all his troubles.

David could not bear the thought of being given over to the hand of his enemies, but he was completely at peace and even happy with the knowledge my times are in your hand. David could say my times are in your hand because he understood that God was in control and ruled from heaven. Yet he also said it because in faith he had committed all things into God's hand. Late in David's life he sinned by taking an unauthorised census of Israel. God presented him with the option of three punishments. David chose the punishment that would most completely set them in the hands of the Lord, explaining: <<*let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into human hands*>> (2 Samuel 24:14b).

Let your face shine upon your servant. David borrowed from the priestly blessing described in Numbers 6:23-27, asking for the goodness and the favour of God to be showered upon David.

Let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. David asked God to do to his enemies that which his enemies wished to do unto David.

Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt. David calls on God to put a stop to those who are condemning him: <<*Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue*>> (Psalm 120:2), and: <<*An enemy dissembles in speaking while harbouring deceit within*>> (Proverbs 26:24). There have always been such people and they will be dealt with: <<*It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'See, the Lord is coming with tens of thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him'*>> (Jude 14-15).

Psalm 31:19-24 - Confidence that the Lord Will Again Keep Me Safe.

The psalm closes with assurance: the God who has made promises and who has kept them in the past will continue to do so.

- 19 O how abundant is your goodness
that you have laid up for those who fear you,
and accomplished for those who take refuge in you,
in the sight of everyone!
- 20 In the shelter of your presence you hide them
from human plots;
you hold them safe under your shelter
from contentious tongues.
- 21 Blessed be the Lord,
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me
when I was beset as a city under siege.
- 22 I had said in my alarm,
'I am driven far from your sight.'

But you heard my supplications
when I cried out to you for help.

Psalm 31:19-22

O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you.

The David who knew such trouble in vv.9-13 is now the same David who praised God so completely at the end of the song. This is because he had a deep trust in God, as reflected in vv.14-18, and that trust was rewarded with joy.

In the shelter of your presence you hide them. Attacked by so many enemies and so many troubles, David found security in the secret place of God's presence. There was comfort and strength in the hidden place of God's presence, of true fellowship with him. There are many followers of Jesus Christ who seem to know very little of the secret place of God's presence. They regard it as only a thing for mystics or the super-spiritual. Yet David was a warrior and man well acquainted with the realities of life. It is true that the life of the spirit seems to come more easily for some than others, but there is an aspect of the secret place of God's presence that is for everyone who puts their trust in him, those who earnestly seek him: *<<My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgements are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness>>* (Isaiah 26:9).

From human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues. The presence of God was so secure for David that he found refuge from not only the plots of his enemies, but even their verbal attacks.

I had said in my alarm, 'I am driven far from your sight.' Earlier in his time of trouble, David hastily said and felt that God had forgotten him and no longer saw him with favour: *<<I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand>>* (Psalm 88:4-5), and: *<<My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end>>* (Isaiah 38:12). Yet when David cried out to God, he heard all of David's supplications.

²³ Love the Lord, all you his saints.

The Lord preserves the faithful,

but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.

²⁴ Be strong, and let your heart take courage,

all you who wait for the Lord.

Psalm 31:23-24

Love the Lord, all you his saints. David's experience with God could not be kept to himself. He had to use what God had done in his life as the motivation and lesson to exhort all God's saints to love the Lord.

A person who truly loves God does not lack any reasons for loving him. Yet, God provides many reasons for people to love him. Spurgeon said of the call to love the Lord, "it has a thousand arguments to enforce it." People should love God:

- Because of the excellence of his character.
- Because it is such a pleasant and profitable exercise.
- Because it is so beneficial to do so.
- Because it is the way to be cleansed from sin.
- Because it will strengthen a person in time of trial.
- Because it will strengthen a person for service.
- Because it is most ennobling.

The Lord preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily. Both aspects are true. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. This encouragement to praise God has a warning to those who refuse to do so. Some might argue that God does not appear to justly punish those who are evil but people can be assured that they will face his final judgement.

Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord. David closed this psalm as a true leader and friend, encouraging others to find what he had found in God. God's people have reason for good courage, because God does strengthen the trusting, hoping heart. Paul revealed that his hope was for all who placed their trust in the Lord: *<<I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing>>* (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

All you who wait for the Lord. All believers are called to wait for God: *<<Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!>>* (Psalm 27:14).