

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister: Rev Ken McIntosh 24th May 2020

Psalm 31 From Anguish to Praise

Psalm 31 is longer than many, and so we must be careful not let our brains be overloaded by exhaustively digging into every phrase, especially in one study. We will therefore keep a certain 'distance' above the text, try to understand the *structure* of the Psalm and its *purpose*, before sampling some of the wonderful treasures it contains.

The *purpose* of the Psalm is found in the last two verses. **Read verses 23, 24.** The Psalm we are told is written by David. But David is writing the Psalm with others in mind – he is being a *friend* to us. He is exhorting us to keep the faith and find strength in the Lord. For David knows that we too will face the sort of struggles he faced because we too belong to God. The Psalmist knew the temptation when trials come to let our love for God grow cold and be unfaithful to him. We can lose heart, imagining our troubles will never end and that God does not care for us. Hence the exhortation from one who is our friend. **Read verses 23, 24.**

So before this final exhortation, David tells us about the struggles the Lord allowed *him* to pass through. He tells us what these struggles were and how he felt. But David also tells us how the Lord enabled him to keep on trusting, keep the faith and be strong in God.

And David tells his testimony by taking us round a similar 'circuit' twice. Each circuit is a journey from anguish to praise. In his trouble, David cries out to God. The Lord delivers him, and then the circuit ends with David's praise of God. The first lap is found in verses 1-8, but then David takes us round another lap in verses 9-22, this time in a little more detail. But both end in the same way – with David praising the God who saves him.

Now we know from history that many have both read and profited by this Psalm. As we shall see, there is evidence that this was a Psalm which the Old Testament prophets Jonah and Jeremiah knew and applied to their own struggles, as did the New Testament martyr Stephen. Then in church history, there are various people who found comfort in the reading of Psalm 31 when in serious trouble. Let me mention two. When John Huss, the Czech reformer was about to be burned alive for his faith, he recited Psalm 31. When Bishop Hooper awaited execution in the reign of Queen Mary, this was one of four Psalms he urged his wife to read and meditate on – the others being Psalms 6, 22, and 30. But before any of these people, the one who profited from this Psalm was our Lord Jesus, for our Saviour repeated one of the verses – verse 5, as he hung in agony on the cross.

So, after we have considered really just an *overview* of this Psalm this morning, let me commend it to your more careful reading and meditation, always remembering the final exhortation – **read verses 23, 24 again.**

Now the first circuit or lap from *anguish to praise* is found in verses 1-8 and we shall give it the title **the hunted man**. David tells us about the time or times in his life when he felt like a *hunted man* – times when there seemed to be an enemy chasing him and on his trail. But our friend David tells us how he cried out to the Lord, trusted in him and knew his deliverance. Let's read about David's *anguish* as the hunted man first. **Read verses 1-6.**

If David is talking about a particular incident in his life, some think it may be the time he was on the run from Saul. Others think it may be the time when David's son Absalom tried to snatch the kingdom from his father and David had to flee from Jerusalem. Others think however that David is speaking more generally from his life's experience.

But look at some of the things he is saying to us by way of counsel. When you think wicked men are after you, when they seem to have it in for you and are trying to trap you, what are you to do? You must run to God. If you have to run *from men* for whatever reason, remember who you can run to. You can run to God. And you can run to him because he is a *refuge* for his people. Look at the other words in these opening verses that essentially say the same thing. The Lord is our *rock of refuge*, and our *fortress*, our *strong fortress*.

The Lord is there, and his help is real because *he* is real. Verse 6 causes a number of commentators to think that *Jonah* thought of this Psalm in the belly of the great fish. **Read verse 6 again.** One line that *Jonah* prays in the belly of the great fish is very similar to this (*Jonah* 2:8). The verse contrasts Yahweh with the worthless gods and idols of the nations that perhaps the enemy trusts in. They cling to *worthless* idols. The word tells us that their gods are not real and are of no significance. They are like vapour which quickly disperses into the air. Whereas our God is a *rock* – our eternal rock of refuge.

While our enemies lips are full of lies, but our God is *the God of truth* (5). He is the God who turns his ear to his people (2) and comes to their rescue. And these truths are all designed to encourage us to call out to the Lord and trust in him as David did. Then notice how our deliverance depends not upon our own righteousness but on the Lord's. **Read verse 1 again.** David is trusting in *the Lord's righteousness* to rescue him and not his own. Another encouragement is that David's rescue and welfare are all bound up with the Lord's reputation and name. **Read verse 3 again.** David is saying that the Lord's reputation would suffer if the Lord were seen to simply give up one of his servants. No, the Lord will rescue David and care for David *for his own glory's sake*.

Then look again at the famous verse 5. **Read verse 5.** Luke records in his Gospel (*Luke* 23:46) that this was one of the sayings of the Lord Jesus as he hung on the cross. "Father into your hands I commit my spirit." A person's spirit is the essence of their life which comes from God. It could be that *David* uttered this at a time when he thought he was going to die. If so, David commits his very being to the Lord - for you cannot commit anything more than your spirit. This is much more than committing a *matter* to God or a *situation* to God. If you commit your *spirit* to him, there is nothing more you can commit.

And we know that our Saviour, knowing he was about to die, committed himself completely into his Father's hands. But we can do that too. Our life is not our own – it belongs to God. He has given to us the gift of life, for a time. But God is such, his character is such, that the believer can, with every confidence commit his spirit to the Lord.

Then following on from this anguish of the hunted man, verses 7 and 8 testify how David's *anguished cries* turned to *praise*. The Lord brought David through the trouble. The Lord answered David's prayer. He rescued the hunted man from trouble and danger. And David wants us to know that. These times of trial and trouble will not last forever. The Lord will bring us through them. **Read verse 7, 8.**

What a relief to know that the Lord knows! He knows the full anguish of our hearts. No one else knows the whole story. There may not be *time* to tell anyone else the whole story. There may not be *the words to adequately express* the whole story. Or our feelings and thoughts may be too embarrassing to tell others the whole story. But the comfort is to know that the Lord knows the whole story – nothing is

hidden from him. He knew the anguish of David's soul. But David rejoiced in the fact that the Lord set David's feet in a spacious place (8).

The enemy wanted to imprison David in a small space - or worse. But the Lord set David free and put his feet in a spacious place. And that is the root meaning of the word 'salvation'. Salvation is being delivered from a small place of dark and airless confinement, into a wide-open space in the sun - freedom. God's freedom. And this is what the gospel invites us to receive from God. We are delivered from the dungeon and ultimately from the eternal judgement of God and brought out into the freedom and sunshine of Jesus Christ.

But why has the Lord done this? The reason is very important and is found in verse 7. **Read verse 7.** It is because of the Lord's love that he rescued David. And it is because of the Lord's love in Christ Jesus that he will rescue us. He *has* saved us through Christ, and he will deliver us from trouble until that day we are brought to heaven where there is perfect freedom and no pain. And so we praise his wonderful name. What god has ever loved his people as we are loved by the Lord? God's love is unfailing and eternal.

And so in verse 1-8 we have moved from *anguish to praise*. But then verses 9-22 follow the same path, only David is perhaps more expressive of his struggles. And we move now from David **the hunted man** to David **the rejected man**. For here is another aspect of the struggle our friend had felt keenly but now offers to us by way of testimony. Not only the feeling of being *hunted* by men, but also of being *rejected* by them. First in verses 9-18 we have David's *anguish* before in verses 19-22 we move again to his *praise* of the Lord.

Read verses 9-13. The rejected man. David is being very honest with us here about his feelings. He tells us how his troubles affected him physically. He mentions his eyes, body and bones. And he talks about weakness, sorrow, grief, groaning and affliction. And so David is telling us that the pressures we face because we are God's people may at times affect our physical health. These things all take their toll.

Some commentators make much of the reply the Pharisees and teachers of the law gave to our Lord Jesus in John 8 when they said to him, "You are not yet 50 years old and you have seen Abraham!" (John 8:57). Now why, when Jesus was in his early thirties, did they say he was not yet 50? It is possible, some question, that the physical body of Jesus had prematurely aged because of the opposition he had faced from sinful men?

It is possible, but what we know for certain is that Jesus knew full well the second affliction David speaks of here – of being *rejected by people*. David tells us he was the contempt of his neighbours (11). There were times when people crossed the street whenever they saw him. David was forgotten as though he were dead (12) and knew the slander of many (13). And so did the Lord Jesus.

Then some scholars think the phrase 'terror on every side' David uses (13) may have been taken up and used by the prophet Jeremiah as he identified with David's rejection. It is a phrase that Jeremiah used quite often in his lonely ministry. And Jeremiah knew this same rejection from those he considered friends. In fact it seems to have been a nickname which people gave Jeremiah. "O here he comes – 'Terror on every side'. I wonder what jolly message has he for us today?"

Now David is warning that this may happen to us as we follow God. Men may reject us. Jesus certainly warned us of it. "All men will hate you because of me" Jesus said. And it was certainly something Jesus experienced himself. There was a time when many deserted him because of his hard teaching. And Jesus was quite alone when he was crucified - even his close disciples had fled and abandoned him.

But David's testimony goes on to tell us how he persevered when this sort of rejection happened. **Read verses 14-18.** David testifies how he persevered in prayer and did not give up. Even though he felt shunned by many, David knew God would not forsake him – 'You are my God' (14). David continued to trust in the Lord. And then this wonderful verse which all God's people can take comfort from. **Read verse 15 again.**

Whatever happened to David, he knew his times, his circumstances and life were all in God's hands. David's life was not out of control. His life was certainly not under the control of the enemy. David's times were in God's hands and like the potter, the Lord would mould and shape David's life through the various trials he faced. And David knew that the Lord did all things well.

This was a verse which the Scottish missionary, Geoffrey Bull meditated on when Chinese communists tried to brain wash him. But the missionary knew that God had sent this time for a reason. And he was greatly comforted by the truth.

Many turned their face away from David. But David knew he could ask that the Lord's face be turned *towards* him. **Read verse 16.** David seems to remember the priestly prayer of Numbers 6. **Read Numbers 6:24-26.** And so our friend is telling us not to lose hope if others forsake us. "Be strong and take heart all you who hope in the Lord. Be faithful to him. He will pay back the wicked in full."

Therefore David prays as he does in verse 17, 18. **Read verses 17, 18 again.** The enemy sought to put David to shame. But David simply asks the Lord to act justly. "Let them be put to shame for their treachery towards God's servant."

But then finally, as in the first lap, we see how David's *anguish* turned to *praise* in verses 19-22. Once again, David testifies how the Lord brought him through. **Read verses 19-22.** As in verses 7 and 8, David writes these verses after knowing the deliverance of the Lord. Once again, as in verse 7, he attributes it all to God's *wonderful love* for his servant. At times, David felt the enemy had besieged him and hemmed him in. But looking back, he realises that what surrounded David was not so much the enemy but *the love of the Lord*. God had *hidden* David from the enemy (20). The Lord had made his *dwelling* with David. David was not so much cut off from men but *hidden with God*. In other words, God turned their intended curse into a blessing.

And our friend David testifies that through all this, he had learned more of the great goodness of the Lord. It was as if the Lord had stored up his goodness so that at such a time David could have an *extra* share of it. Through the trial, David knew the *nearness* of the Lord. He experienced *more* of God. And he testifies that the Lord's goodness is great and his love, wonderful.

This is what David had learned, having come through his trials. And he writes to those who *will* face trials, and of course who are going through trials at the moment. His testimony is, "I've been there. And I can testify to the Lord's deliverance and that the Lord's purpose is good, kind and wise."

Who knows how this Psalm must have encouraged the Lord Jesus as he faced his own trials for our sake. And who knows how this Psalm will minister to us personally. We don't know what future trials will be. We don't know who they will involve or how long they may last. But we do know the God who is over all these things. And we can trust in his unfailing and wonderful love for us. And so we hear again the application of these verses. **Read verses 23, 24.**