

Prayers of the Helpless

Psalm 31

Introduction: In this life there are times when we feel absolutely helpless. We face circumstances that are out of our control (medical, relational, financial/employment issues) or we face our own sinful habits or addictions. All of us can probably identify an area of our lives in which we feel helpless. In this final study on learning to pray from the psalms, we're going to consider Psalm 31, which shows us how we can pray when we're helpless. In this psalm David pours out his complaint to God as he was experiencing a variety of difficult circumstances that caused him to feel helpless. He wasn't trying to figure out a good game plan; he was asking God to rescue him.

Opening Discussion: Where did you feel the most helpless this past week?

Read Psalm 31

1. What kinds of troubling issues does David seem to be facing?
2. Looking specifically at verses 1-4 and 15-18, how do you see David call out to God to be rescued? What kinds of things does he pray in his distress?
3. In these same verses, what aspects of God's character does He reflect upon?

Steve said:

What we're reading here is David's cry to God, "Rescue me! Save me! Deliver me! Let me not be ashamed!" I'd like to commend this type of praying to you when you find yourself in a helpless situation. On the basis of David's example, you can say to God, "I can't solve this problem. I'm tired of trying. Because of Your lovingkindness, rescue me, deliver me, save me from my enemies, from my circumstances, from myself. . . ."

4. Are there any areas of your life right now where you feel helpless and you sense the need to cry out to God to rescue you? If so, what is it?

Steve said:

Ode Hallesby makes this observation:

Be not anxious because of your helplessness. Above all, do not let it prevent you from praying. Helplessness is the real secret and the impelling power of prayer. You should therefore rather try to thank God for the feeling of helplessness which He has given you. It is one of the greatest gifts which God can impart to us. For it is only when we are helpless that we open our hearts to Jesus and let Him help us in our distress, according to His grace and mercy. (p. 23)

5. Do you agree that "Helplessness is the real secret and the impelling power of prayer"? Why or why not?

Steve said:

Of course there's a risk to crying out to God in this way. What if He doesn't deliver me in the ways I've envisioned? If you've lived very long at all, you've known people who've prayed for healing but haven't been healed, people who've prayed for marriages that have ended up divorced, people who've prayed for financial provision but who barely get by. It's tempting to pray small, safe prayers so I'm not disappointed (with Him at least) no matter what happens.

6. In situations where a person prays for some kind of deliverance, but God doesn't answer in the way that was expected (i.e. in the way that seemed best and right to that person), how should we think about such situations theologically?
7. Read verses 5-7 and 14. How do you see David express trust in God before anything is resolved?

Steve said:

Why does it matter whether or not we express trust in God? Why does it matter whether or not we have faith? Because "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). You can be rescued from your trouble and still not have faith; and if you don't have faith, you don't please God; and if you don't please God, you've missed the point of your life! The goal of life isn't merely better circumstances; it's pleasing God.

8. How might it affect you in troubling circumstances if you remembered that the goal of life isn't better circumstances, but rather to be pleasing to God?