

## ***Prayers of the Helpless***

### Psalm 31

At various times in our lives we feel absolutely helpless. We face circumstances that are out of our control, and we know it. Sometimes we face challenging medical problems that can't necessarily be addressed by diet or medication/treatment or exercise. Sometimes a relationship with a spouse, a child, or a friend is so far gone that you're out of options. What do you do after you've tried everything twice? Sometimes sinful habits or addictions expose how helpless we are to live in a way that's good and healthy. Sometimes you face financial/employment issues that aren't fixed through hard work and perseverance; sometimes you are at the mercy of forces that are far beyond your control.

You can probably identify an area of your life in which you feel helpless. Today as we wrap up our study on learning to pray from the psalms, we're going to consider Psalm 31. This psalm shows us how we can pray when we're helpless. Psalm 31 is primarily a psalm of lament in which David pours out his complaint to God. It's hard to nail down exactly what David was experiencing when he prayed this psalm to God. Apparently David was experiencing a variety of difficult circumstances. He mentions 1) enemies who schemed against him (v. 4, 8), 2) his own iniquities (v. 10), and 3) bodily weakness (v. 10). When people saw him coming down the street, they turned the other way (v. 11). David was helpless. He wasn't trying to figure out a good game plan; he was asking God to rescue him.

This is a long psalm with quite a bit of repetition, so I won't have time to make comment on every single verse. And so we're simply going to notice the two primary themes in this psalm - each of which will suggest an idea for our prayer lives.

Theme #1: ***"God, rescue me!"*** The first theme involves David's plea for God to "rescue him." David knows that he's in dire circumstances. He doesn't need a little help; he needs to be ***rescued***. David prays like a man who understands that he doesn't have any other options:

1 In You, O Lord, I have taken refuge;  
Let me never be ashamed;  
In Your righteousness deliver me.

A refuge is a place of safety, a place where you're protected from dangers. David says, "In You, O Lord, I have taken refuge"; he fled to God Himself for safety. When David prays, "Let me never be ashamed," he is asking God to protect him from the shame that he'd experience if his enemies prevailed. In an absolute sense Jesus has taken away our shame through His death on the cross. But in an experiential sense, we still experience shame in various ways. It seems appropriate for us to pray what David prayed. "In your righteousness deliver me" is a way of asking for God's justice to prevail in his specific circumstances; David's deliverance would be an outworking of God's righteousness/justice.

In verse 2 David continues to plead with God:

2 Incline Your ear to me, rescue me quickly;  
Be to me a rock of strength,  
A stronghold to save me.

David is pleading with God to answer his prayers and rescue him out of his desperate circumstances. He wants to experience God as “a rock of strength” and “a stronghold”; David wants God to save him. David had confidence in appealing to God in these terms because of his past experience with God.

3 For You are my rock and my fortress;  
For Your name's sake You will lead me and guide me.  
4 You will pull me out of the net which they have secretly laid for me,  
For You are my strength.

These statements suggest that David wasn't praying in a vacuum. He was drawing upon his past experience with God as his rock and fortress. God had delivered/rescued/saved David many times throughout his life (as we read in 1 and 2 Samuel). Let's look down at verses 15 through 18 for another expression of this same theme:

15 My times are in Your hand;  
Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and from those who persecute me.  
16 Make Your face to shine upon Your servant;  
Save me in Your lovingkindness.  
17 Let me not be put to shame, O Lord, for I call upon You;  
Let the wicked be put to shame, let them be silent in Sheol.  
18 Let the lying lips be mute,  
Which speak arrogantly against the righteous  
With pride and contempt.

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. . . .”

You may find that you do some of your best praying when you're helpless. Your helplessness might open you up to aspects of your relationship with God that have been closed off for years. 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)

I find that I do some of my best praying when I recognize my helplessness. When I'm helpless and I know it, I tend to have a sense of urgency that is sometimes lacking from my praying. I tend to take more seriously the fact that in Jesus Christ I have **full access** to God Himself. I can ask, seek, and knock because God LOVES to give good gifts to His children. I can come boldly to God and simply ask Him to rescue me.

Of course there's a risk in 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.

There's a tension in relation to prayer that cannot really be removed in this life. We are encouraged to pray for things, believing; but not every prayer is answered as it is prayed. This is where our praying needs to be informed by a larger theology of prayer. I would summarize the issue in this way (others surely understand this tension differently). We should pray the biggest, boldest prayers that we have the faith to pray. I've been in prayer meetings where people have prayed for brutal dictators to come to faith in Jesus. Personally I didn't really have the faith to pray for them in that way; but we should pray prayers as large as our faith will allow. And then we leave the issue in God's hands. It's not that we necessarily become passive, but we rest in the knowledge that we've entrusted the issue to God. If He doesn't act, it's not because we haven't prayed.

In that context, I would comment the type of praying David did in Psalm 31: crying out to God, "Rescue me, deliver me, save me!"

Theme #2: **Trust in God.** In the midst of his helplessness, David expresses profound trust in God. Verse 5 will probably sound familiar to you; Jesus quoted this verse a thousand years later, just before He died on the cross (Luke 23:46). David writes to God:

5 Into Your hand I commit my spirit;  
You have ransomed me, O Lord, God of truth.

David entrusted his spirit into God's hand. Your spirit is that immaterial part of you that it most uniquely "you"; spirit is basically synonymous with "soul" in this verse. David entrusted himself into God's hands. "God, I trust You with my very spirit."

In the midst of his turmoil - before anything was resolved - David trusted in God. In verse 6 David makes a contrast between his trust in God and those who trust in idols:

6 I hate those who regard vain idols,  
But I trust in the Lord.

As we saw last week, David viewed God's enemies as his enemies; he hated those who hated God. When he calls them "vain" idols he is pointing out that idols are really worthless and impotent in providing help for those who "regard" or "cling to" (NIV) them. By contrast, David says, "But I trust in the Lord." David had confidence in God and in God's care for him. In verses 7 David begins to express exactly why this was the case.

7 I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness,  
Because You have seen my affliction;  
You have known the troubles of my soul,

David's trust was rooted in God's "lovingkindness" - God's love that flowed from the fact that He was bound by covenant to David. In the Abrahamic covenant God had promised to bless Abraham's descendants and to make them more numerous than the stars in the sky. The Lord's lovingkindness gave David the assurance that God had "seen [his] affliction" and had "known the troubles of [his] soul." David took great comfort in the simple fact that God knew the troubles he experienced in his soul.

What was true of David in the Abrahamic covenant is certainly true of us in the new covenant (which is really a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant). God is bound to us eternally because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We should live our lives with the knowledge that God sees and knows all of our troubles.

Therefore, we can (and should) express our trust in God *in the midst of* any turmoil and any trouble we are experiencing. Actually we can express *more* trust in God in the midst of our troubles than at any other time.

Look down in verse 14 at another expression of David's trust.

14 But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord,  
I say, "You are my God."

Being rescued wasn't enough for David. You can be rescued from some danger and not be pleasing to God (e.g., the children of Israel in the wilderness experienced dramatic deliverance, but they were largely w/o faith). And so David declared, "I trust in You, O Lord," and "You are my God."

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.

I was talking with someone this past week who is going through some rough waters; she is at a point of helplessness. But she "gets it" in terms of what we're talking about this morning. After reading through the book of Job, she understands that God doesn't answer all of our questions. But she senses that her helplessness is drawing her closer

to God. She even asked the question (my paraphrase), “If I had the choice to ***not have*** this problem but not be close to God or to ***have*** this problem and be drawn closer to God in the process, which would I choose?” Her helplessness is drawing her closer to God in ways that are precious. She’s trusting in God in new and deeper ways . . . and she’s therefore pleasing God in new and deeper ways - which is the point of life, right?

In the midst of your helplessness, as you cry out to God to rescue you, express to God your trust in Him. God is always doing something deeper than we ever imagined.

***A final word of encouragement:*** (a word that seeks to raise courage among God’s people)

23 O love the Lord, all you His godly ones!  
The Lord preserves the faithful  
And fully recompenses the proud doer.  
24 Be strong and let your heart take courage,  
All you who hope in the Lord.