

Psalm 31 - Tough times call for tough talking with God Kingham & Churchill 2/8/2009

Readings: 1 Samuel 21:1-9 & 22:6-19 & Psalm 31

Introduction

The Old Testament was Jesus' Bible and the Psalms were his hymnbook.

And when he attacked the Pharisees for ignoring the Bible he called it 'the Word of God'.

The apostle Paul explained in the New Testament that "All Scripture is god-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..."

Whilst the writer of Hebrews said "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Hebrews 4:12

Same thing, different words.

So whenever you come to read the Bible a really good thing to do is to pray first for God to speak to you through it.

It is his words, so you should expect him to speak to you.

And a good question to keep before your mind is this:

Why did the Lord want this bit kept for all time in his word?

Or to put it another way, based on that quote from Paul...

How might God want to teach me something new, correct something I've misunderstood, rebuke something I'm doing wrong, or train me to live as he wants me to.

So let's pray that together before we look at Psalm 31.

Background and overview of the Psalm

We don't know for certain when David wrote this Psalm nor what was going on, though Saul may have been the cause.

But David was certainly near the end of his tether as he faced terrible attacks from enemies.

His enemies were slandering his name, turning all his friends and neighbours against him, even trying to kill him.

But it does help to flesh out what David was going through if you read of the kind of attacks he was under in the time between killing Goliath and King Saul's death.

You can read it in the second half of the book of 1 Samuel.

But remember that David was probably still only in his twenties when Saul died.

By then he had lived several normal lifetimes.

And he had lived them in the closest of relationships with the Lord, Jehovah, his personal shepherd, whom he is proud to call 'my God' in v14.

So even if all Scripture hadn't been god-breathed, a prayer of David, written when going through such tough times, would be well worth our time and study.

Because the Lord called David "a man after his own heart."

Don't you long for God to say the same thing about you?

'You're a man or woman after God's own heart'.

So the Psalm falls into three parts.

The first two are prayer, both ending in expressions of extraordinary trust in the Lord. The third, from v19, is a response of praise and testimony where David exhorts you and me to put our trust in the same God he is proud to name and to love.

So let's look at the first part of his prayer in vv1-8, which shows his Confident trust in a faithful God.

Confident trust in a faithful God v1-8

There are probably many reasons why God has put lots of David's prayers in the Bible and none of mine.

But one must be that I simply don't pray like David did.

And that's all the more shameful when I bear in mind that I live this side of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul writes in Romans 5, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

David had no inkling of the depth of God's love for him that you and I have been shown by the Lord Jesus.

So why don't I pray like this man?

Why don't I trust God like this man?

Why don't I prove over and over again God's faithfulness, like this man did?

So how do I pray when I am in a real pickle, really down and struggling with whatever life is throwing at me?

And bear in mind I've not been through anything like the things David faced.

Well, if I'm honest, I tend to dump on the Lord all the details of how tough things are for me and how unfair life is.

I really rattle God's cage; give him serious earache.

I don't know how he doesn't get totally fed up with me going on and on about my difficulties.

But what about David? Does he do it like me?

Well, look how he begins his prayer at verse 1:

"In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame..."

v3: "Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me."

End of v4: "you are my refuge."

And v5: "Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth."

Do you see what he is doing here, because it's a really good thing for you and me to learn?

He is talking to the God he knows, not to a stranger.

He calls him by his personal name, translated as 'the Lord' in small capitals in modern Bibles.

But this is the Hebrew name that God gave when Moses asked his name.

The closest we can get in English is Jehovah.

How does David know this Jehovah, the one and only God?

Because God has made himself known, and recorded all David needed to know about him the Scripture.

And because over the years, even though he is still quite young, David had regularly taken Jehovah at his word and proved that he is all he claims to be in Scripture.

He told Moses that he was “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...”

Compassionate; gracious; slow to anger; abounding in love and faithfulness; forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

And yet totally just - he doesn't leave the guilty unpunished.

And he's the covenant God who had committed himself to be their God as they committed themselves to be his people.

And so for all those reasons, David is confident to speak with the Lord in prayer.

What David doesn't do is play mind games with himself, pretending all is fine because he's talking to God.

Even in these opening verses he mentions his need for help.

v1: “let me never be put to shame; deliver me ...”

V2: “Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me.”

And so on.

But as he begins his prayer, his requests are all based on reminding himself what kind of God he is dealing with.

And in telling the Lord, right in the midst of the tough times, how much he, David, is trusting him.

And so he can say, very early on in his prayer time, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

That means the whole of his life.

But it particularly shows the importance of the spiritual side of his life. of his spirit.

His relationship with God and his hope of that relationship going on into eternity.

If those words sound familiar to you, that's because Jesus said them as his last words from the cross.

“Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

When he had said this, he breathed his last.” Luke 23:46

And so did Stephen, the first Christian to be killed for his faith: “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’” Acts 7:59

David was asking for God to save and rescue him from real people and real hardships in the real here and now.

But he never forgets the importance of the next life, because this life is only a short part of eternity.

“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

We're promised in Romans 8 “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

How does God do that? Paul continues...

“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” 8:28f

That means that what is for my best in the long term for my spirit might not be my ideal choice in the short term.

David remembers that, and so should you and I.

Spiritual life, my relationship with God, should be paramount in my thinking and therefore in my praying.

Will you do that?

Will you so immerse yourself in the Word of God, just as David and Jesus did, that you really know the Lord.

And will you deepen and personalise that relationship in heart to heart, trusting prayer?

And will you take him at his word, in the midst of your daily life, and say to him what David says?

“In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge... Into your hands I commit my spirit..., O LORD, the God of truth.”

The honest complaint and desperate plea v9-18

That's the bulk of the sermon, because I reckon it is the hardest thing for most of us to learn about praying.

Focus on God; remember what he is like; trust him; keep your spiritual life at the front of your mind and prayers.

But at this point David does give the Lord all the details of what he is going through, and how hard he is finding things.

He just gets things into the right perspective.

Did you notice that by v7 he is able to say “I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul.”

It's not clear whether he means that God has previously seen his previous affliction and anguish of soul.

Or perhaps it means that he is reminded that the Lord currently sees his current afflictions and anguish of soul.

Either make sense, and both are worth reminding yourself in the midst of a dark time.

God has seen and known what I've been through in the past and he sees and know what I'm going through now.

And he loves me; he is compassionate towards me; he is slow to anger with me.

And on the basis of that, not necessarily yet a miraculous intervention by God to save me from the situation, he says he will “rejoice and be glad in your love”.

I've not yet found a verse in Scripture that says that rejoicing and praising God is a good technique that you might like to try next time you're a bit low!

What I do find is that 'rejoice' and 'praise the Lord' are usually either describing what the writer does, often in the midst of real suffering.

Or they are commands for you and me to do.

Like Paul writes from his underground prison cell.

"But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering..., I am glad and rejoice."

Philippians 2:17

Example!

Then he tells them: "Rejoice in the Lord always."

And just in case we don't get the message, he continues... "I will say it again: Rejoice!" Philippians 4:4

Command!

Don't wait until you feel like rejoicing before you actually rejoice and give thanks - do it!

So now, focussed on God and rejoicing in the Lord's love, now he tells the Lord all about what he's going through.

It's all there in glorious Technicolor from v9 to v13.

'It hurts; it's horrid; have you seen what they're doing; I can't take any more!'

David isn't some kind of spiritual super hero who doesn't feel things like you and I do!

He wears his heart on his sleeve.

He's a great warrior king, but he's a very emotional man who feels things deeply and takes things very personally.

He just knows the Lord, his God, and he trusts in him as his refuge and strength and saviour.

Let's all do the same! v23-24

So let's close as David does, in his last two verses.

"Love the LORD, all his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full. Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD."

It's as if he's suddenly aware that the rest of us have been listening in on his very personal and private prayer!

So he turns round and faces us and, without a trace of embarrassment, tells us to do what he's been doing.

Love the Lord!

Remember that the Lord preserves the faithful.

So be strong and take heart.

And place all your hope in the Lord.

Will you do that?

Will you read Psalm 31 and learn to pray like David did?

Will you get to know the Lord your God like David did, and then some?

Because, of course, you have the enormous privilege of knowing Jesus, "the image of the invisible God". Colossians 1:15

David didn't!

And you can be absolutely assured of eternal life and God's forgiveness by trusting in Jesus' death on the cross for you.

David couldn't!

David didn't have those benefits, and look how he prayed.

And look how, having prayed, he encouraged those around him to trust the Lord as he did.

Will you really work at trusting the Lord today and this week.

And will you work just as hard at encouraging others to know him, love him and put their trust and hope in him?

v14: "I trust in you, O LORD; I say, 'You are my God.'"

Prayer (do business)