

## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: the wisdom of God*

We are astounded at Your wisdom O God, for You have created a plan to save all people who have fallen from grace, and it is woven into the very fabric of creation and the natural world. You, Lord God, have created us and made us living, feeling, spiritual beings with self understanding and a desire to find You, our Maker! Lord God, forgive our tendency to wander away from Your plan for us, and draw us gently back onto the right way pathway by which we can be fulfilled in You and hopeful of our eternal destiny! We praise You, Lord God Almighty! **AMEN**

### For myself

*Pray about your feelings, yes those feeling that you don't want to have, such as the frustration and anger, the sense of unworthiness and self defeatism, or perhaps the feelings of stress, betrayal or deep disappointment in others, especially within the church. Tell Your Lord, and let Jesus be your healer*

### For others

*Pray for whatever items of news appear on your TV channels today, and do so as they are reported. As you listen to the news, offer up swift 'arrow' prayers to God; 'bless X', or 'save Y', or even 'In Your name, Lord Jesus, NO!' Let such responses be your way of reacting to the news rather than to let it frustrate you or make you upset or angry.*

## Meditation

For light which breaks open night sky to make dawn,  
I praise the Lord of all Creation.

For rest at the close of a day full of work and pressure,  
I praise the God of the Sabbath.

For love which smiles through the face of one I love,  
I praise the Lord of Faithfulness.

For hope reaching beyond the possible to the impossible,  
I praise the God of my Salvation.

For energy which enables me to work throughout my day,  
I praise the Lord of Power and Strength.

For victory over the enemy and assurance of love's victory,  
I praise my Jesus, risen from the dead!

I praise You, God Almighty, for my destiny is in You!

## Bible Passage

### **Psalm 31:1-13**

*For the director of music. A psalm of David.*

- <sup>1</sup> I have taken refuge in You, O LORD;  
do not let me ever be put to shame;  
deliver me by Your righteousness.
- <sup>2</sup> Turn and listen to me,  
rescue me quickly!  
Be a rock of safety for me,  
a stronghold to save me.
- <sup>3</sup> Because You are my rock and my fortress,  
lead and guide me for the sake of Your name.
- <sup>4</sup> Free me from the trap they set for me,  
for You are my refuge.
- <sup>5</sup> Into Your hands I commit my spirit;  
redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.
  
- <sup>6</sup> I hate those who serve useless idols;  
And as for me, I trust in the LORD.
- <sup>7</sup> I will be glad and rejoice in Your love;  
for You saw my affliction,  
and You knew the distress of my soul.
- <sup>8</sup> You have not handed me over to the enemy  
but have set my feet in a free and open place.
  
- <sup>9</sup> Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;  
my eyes are weary with grief,  
as are my soul and my inner being.
- <sup>10</sup> My life is worn out with anguish  
and my years by sighing;  
my strength fails because of my distress,  
and my bones waste away.
  
- <sup>11</sup> Because of all my enemies,  
I am an object of scorn;  
And a horror to my friends  
those who see me on the street back away from me.
- <sup>12</sup> I have been forgotten by them as though I were dead;  
I have become like a broken pot.
- <sup>13</sup> For I hear the whispering of the crowds

- terror on every side!  
As they conspire against me,  
they plot to take my life.

## Review

It will take us two days to study Psalm 31. This great poem has a single theme, so both this and tomorrow's study are best read closely together. If you have time, please read the whole psalm, for this will help you understand it all the better.

David begins by calling to the Lord for help (31:1,2). He believes in the Lord's power and strength, but needs help to overcome his very real problems; e.g. '*You are my rock and my fortress ... free me from the trap they have set me*' (31:3,4). This tension between calling for help and trust in God dominates the psalm, though the second half (31:14-24) expresses much more hope and confidence; the Lord will help (31:23,24), especially those who '*wait*' for Him.

So why do we need a psalm like this? Surely, God's people have been saved by Christ, and know they can defeat evil in His strength? True, but most of us find ourselves 'under attack' from the enemy from time to time, and like David, we call out to God for help. So by reading a psalm such as this we call the Gospel to mind and put it into effect. It takes real life seriously and acknowledges the pain and strife all people experience, but it then directs us towards security of faith in God. Now if David could celebrate this, how much more can we, who know Christ's salvation! Most of the psalms take the troubles of life seriously, but then show us how to find God despite them; this is why they remain important to God's people today.

Psalm 31 echoes many of our own difficult experiences. The words, '*My life is worn out with anguish, and my years by sighing*' (31:10) sound like someone who is aged, perhaps bereaved, and '*I am an object of scorn and a horror to my friends*' (31:11) sounds like someone who has just made a big mistake! But we are nevertheless challenged to have the same confidence as David, '*You are my rock ... lead me and guide me ...*' (31:3). Such words steel our spirits against the works of the enemy, and lead us towards honest faith (31:9). When the Father hears such prayers, He can truly help us.

## Going Deeper

Holding this balance between speaking openly about our trials and also about our faith in God is the key to understanding Psalm 31. However, there is one great verse within our text; '*into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.*' (31:5) The beginning of this verse was spoken out by Jesus when He was on the Cross (Luke 23:46). So Jesus certainly knew this psalm, and it is also possible that this verse (31:5) holds an important key for our deeper understanding not just of the psalm, but of Christ's work on the Cross.

### ***The origins and purpose of Psalm 31***

Some scholars categorise this psalm a 'lament' as if it were a tale of woe, whilst others think it as a psalm of 'praise' with a fair amount of anxiety thrown in! The psalm may well reflect some of David's experiences, and because so much of his life is recorded it is relatively easy to find tales within 1 and 2 Samuel which fit the themes of the psalm; especially from the time when he was on the run from Saul, in the latter chapters of 1 Samuel. Others see in this psalm a collection of different sayings, because almost all the

verses of Psalm 31 can be found somewhere elsewhere else in the Old Testament: for example; verse 2 is the same as Psalm 119:40; verse 3 is the same as Psalm 102:3; verse 7 is the same as Jonah 2:9; and verse 11 is the same as Jeremiah 20:18! And that is only a few of nearly 20 possible direct connections!

Clearly, this psalm is not like the one before, Psalm 30, which is obviously a call to repentance. It has come to be written down as a very general psalm, calling God's people to turn to Him in the midst of life's trials. It is a poem of godly wisdom designed to offer the user help in times of difficulty. If you know this psalm and use it, then you will find that it offers you godly assistance and advice in all kinds of difficult circumstances, and it can help you keep on the right track with Your Lord. Christians have always used it in this way.

### ***Into Your hands I commit my spirit ...***

Apart from the famous saying from Psalm 22:1 '*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*' this is the only other Psalm Jesus quoted when dying on the Cross (see 31:5). In the very moment when He knew that He had completed His Father's will, He accepted death with these words, '*Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit ...*' (Luke 23:46). So in these last moments of His life, Jesus affirmed that His Father was in control of what was happening to Him. Jesus knew where He was going, and what He said was no accident or mere anguished repetition. Intriguingly, both Psalms 22 and 31, quoted by Jesus on the Cross follow the same spiritual path, from trouble and distress to confidence in the redemptive power of Almighty God. They surely point us towards God's intentions for His Son Jesus, for His resurrection, and therefore also for us and our salvation. We who believe in the resurrection of our Lord are blessed by the knowledge that what Jesus endured on the Cross has been explained for us in psalms such as these, and many other Scriptures from the Old Testament.

Because of this, the wonderful expression '*into Your hands I commit my spirit*' have become a powerful formula of faith into which the rest of the psalm, with all its anguish and distress, is set. As we read these words, we do not have to think of death. To commit one's spirit into the Lord's hands is to trust God completely for both the present and the future, because of His Covenant faithfulness. Indeed, the Covenant is essential to our understanding of this psalm, for all the positive words in these verses describe God's character and His Covenant with Israel: '*righteousness*' (31:1); '*save*' (31:2); '*God of truth*' (31:5); '*trust in the Lord*' (31:6); '*I rejoice in Your love*' (31:7); '*You have set my feet in a free and open space*' (31:8); and much more in the second half of the psalm to be studied tomorrow.

### ***Security in the Lord***

If we now use the famous phrase of verse 5 as the key, then much of the meaning of the Psalm falls into place. Verse 1 declares that we do not have to fall into Satan's trap of feelings of shame because we can know we are safe in the Lord's righteousness, something true for us now in Jesus. This is worth dwelling on, for shame can only have power in our lives if we doubt what God can do for us, and if we harbour within ourselves such things as un-confessed sin, and try to keep this hidden from Him. We find true refuge in the Lord only when we have submitted to Him completely, and within this security there is no place nor desire for the hiding of sin or anything else.

Verses 2 and 3 speak of the Lord as a 'stronghold' at times of trouble or insecurity. The psalm speaks with a confident and positive voice, '*Be a rock of safety ...*' (31:2) and '*You lead me and guide me ...*' (31:3). The enemy's '*trap*' (31:4) has no power over one who has taken refuge in the Lord; and this is the spiritual confidence we may have when we face the enemy ourselves. The psalm speaks to us like an inner voice of experience and faith, assuring us of the Lord's strength and salvation which is there to be used to stand against the enemy, even at a moments notice.

### ***Confidence despite trouble***

Now look carefully at the next verses, 6-8, and you will find that they, too, are a solid expression of confidence, built upon mature experience. David hates 'useless idols' (31:6), but he confirms his trust in the Lord, more specifically, God's 'love' (31:7) which gives him confidence that he will never be 'handed over to the enemy' (31:7,8). Yet again, the word for 'love' used here is the famous Hebrew word 'cheseth' which describes the faithful 'covenant' love of God for His people; a love that banishes any fear the enemy tries to throw at God's people. Even the extremes of life such as rejection by others (31:11) the distress of illness (3:9) the trials of ageing (31:10), and the paranoia of isolation (13:12,13), are all bearable in the strength of the Lord God who loves His people.

Clearly, the sense of rejection and suffering described in verses 9 to 13 is considerable and it is difficult not to feel the weight and perhaps 'terror' (31:1§3) of what is described. We should remember, however, that much of what is written about is true of the life of Jesus, in particular, as He faced his final few days and His death on the Cross. The resolution of these horrors is not found in the verses we have read today, but is certainly found within the verses which follow; 'I trust in You, O Lord; I say "You are my God"' (31:14). All the trials and tribulations that the world can throw at us are as nothing, if we can place ourselves in the hands of the Lord our God, who in His son Jesus, has faced all these things Himself, and is victorious.

## Discipleship

### **Application**

#### ***Trusting God in the midst of suffering***

I wonder whether preachers have really found this message here in this psalm? What we have been talking about is normally thought to be theology found in the writings of Paul; for example, in the second letter to the Corinthians where he speaks of the great sufferings that a servant of the Lord will endure for the sake of the Gospel (2 Cor 11:21ff). But no great theme of scripture is confined to one Testament of the Word of God, Old or New. Jesus knew He had to suffer to complete the Gospel because the example of His forebears the prophets spoke directly about it (see Isaiah 53, for example). Paul also knew that anyone who bore a prophetic message would suffer for it because that was the testimony of scriptures. He accepted his own suffering, and made it his '*boast in the Lord*' (2 Cor 10:13, 11:10f.).

#### ***Facing evil and knowing God's solutions***

What we have read today in Psalm 31 is all part of this Scriptural testimony to the way that the Word of God works in this world. The created world is full of evil whether we like it or not, and the only way that sense can be made of life is for victory to be established over all evil and suffering. In Christ, we have the secret of God's way of victory, and we may overcome it as a matter of routine, through our Lord. Our psalm testifies to this, and gives us poetic words which remind us of this powerful truth, if we will use them.

### **Ideas for what to do**

- Do you face any suffering that seems insurmountable? If not, you are greatly blessed! You may find that life will throw something unexpected at you some time, and you will then have to deal with the enemy head on. When a loved one dies, or when an accident changes your life, for example.
- I suggest that Psalm 31 can be a powerful help in Christian discipleship. You will find that some of its phrases will sink into your mind and your general thoughts. Once

there, these words will help sustain you and strengthen you in all your battles against the enemy. This is true for many psalms, but especially so for Psalm 31.

### **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. Is suffering accepted as part of being a Christian, in your experience? Why should we expect it?
2. What does it mean to say '*into Your hands I commit my spirit*' – is this a phrase we can use at times other than the death of someone?
3. How may God's people be helped to overcome the evils that afflict them? How can this psalm help?

## **Final Prayer**

Great God of passion and strength, teach me to hold my nerve when facing trouble. Grant that I may learn from the example of Jesus, who never ran from a challenge and faced all circumstances in the confidence that comes from trust and obedience. I place myself into Your hands this day, O Lord, and pray I have to courage to do so every day. AMEN