

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: the wisdom of God

Look at the world around you , and thank God for His wisdom. Praise God for the Word by which He spoke Creation into existence.

For myself

I thank You, heavenly Father, for the love that is shown to me by those around me. I do not know every time someone prays for me, perhaps a friend from church remembers me, or someone in my family. But I am grateful for these prayers. Make me diligent in praying for other people, heavenly Father, so that I might become more like Christ.

For others

Pray for scientists and researchers who work to produce medication for health services. Pray that instead of being governed by the commercial motive of profit, research might go into the drugs needed for our long term health, such as the urgent need for new antibiotics. Pray that God will motivate us to do what is right for humanity.

Meditation

Where can I find peace,
except upon my bed, to sleep and dream
and rest in the knowledge of Your love?

Where can I work,
except at all that You have set before me to do
and spend my life in serving You and others?

Where can I walk,
except along the path that reaches out before me
as I strive to be a disciple of the Living Lord?

When can I speak,
except when You have placed Your word within me
leading me to speak Your love to those around me?

What can I think,
except that Your Spirit sets me free to be creative
filling me with the breath of life that liberates my mind?

Where can I be,
except here, right now, with You my Lord and God
Where Your love makes fulfilment in my daily life?

Bible Passage

Psalm 31:14-24

- ¹⁴ But as for me, I will trust in you, O LORD;
I say, 'You are my God.'
- ¹⁵ For my time of deliverance lies in Your hands,
my rescue from enemies and those who pursue me.
- ¹⁶ Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your faithful love.
- ¹⁷ O LORD, let me not be put to shame,
for I have called out to you;
but let the wicked be put to shame
and lie silent in the grave.
- ¹⁸ Let lying lips be silenced,
for with pride and contempt
they speak arrogantly against the righteous.
- ¹⁹ How great is Your goodness,
which You have set aside for those who fear You,
You have done it for those who trust in You
in the sight of all the people.
- ²⁰ You will hide them safe in Your presence
from the conspiracies of others;
You keep them safe in Your shelter,
protected from tongues of strife.
- ²¹ Blessed be the LORD,
who has shown his faithful love to me.
when I was overcome.
- ²² In my alarm I said,
'I am cut off from Your sight!'
But You most certainly heard my cry
when I called to You for help.
- ²³ Love the LORD, all his saints!
The LORD preserves the faithful,
but he pays the arrogant back in full.
- ²⁴ Be strong and courageous of heart,
all you who wait for the LORD.

Review

This reading is the second half of Psalm 31, which we began to study yesterday. The psalm begins with an appeal to trust in God in the midst of trial and distress (31:1-5), and it calls on the believer to accept that although life is far from smooth, the love of God makes a difference. Our inspiration here is verse 5, which was used by Jesus on the Cross, *'into Your hands I commit my spirit ...'* (31:5); when we say these words we identify with Christ and commit ourselves to God, trusting Him for everything.

But the psalm has more to say and we will not discover this until we have read it all. Any of us can take a sentence from a psalm, appreciate it, and then use it like a religious motto. But only proper study of the whole psalm will yield its greatest blessings.

At the beginning of our reading today, the psalm changes track. It no longer focusses on trials (31:1-13), but on God's deliverance, and the more we read, the more we get to know about God's love, power and deliverance! At the beginning of today's passage in verse 14, most Bible translations say; *'I trust in You, O Lord ...'*. This sounds wonderful, but the Hebrew sentence begins with a much stronger emphasis on the word 'I', so I have tried to capture this; *'But as for me, I will trust in you, O Lord ...'* These are no mere details, for despite the psalms continued complaints, for example about people with *'lying lips'* (31:18), or *'conspiracies of others'* (31:20), the psalm is now driven strongly by a greater sense of deep personal conviction and faith in God; *'How great is your goodness! ... Blessed be the Lord! ... Love the Lord all his saints!'* (31:19,21,23).

As we read on to the end of the psalm, this sense of conviction and faith gets ever stronger, ultimately overwhelming the evidence of life's trials, which become less and less significant (31:15,18,20,22). The message of this psalm is that in the midst of life's difficulties, God's love, truth and justice are sufficient to overcome all the works of the enemy! It ends with a classic Hebrew battle cry, *'Be strong and courageous, all of you who wait on the Lord!'* (see Joshua 1:6,7,18, 1 Chron 19:13, Dan 10:19). Let God's people go forward, not back!

Going Deeper

This is no small matter, and our study will now reflect this understanding of the psalm. We will begin by looking again at how verses 5 and 14 hold the psalm together, and then explore both the message of trust within the psalm and the reason why this message was, and is, so important.

A review of verse 5

The Hebrew text of verse 5 reads literally *'into Your hand I commit my spirit ...'*. This sounds odd, because we expect the plural as found in most translations *'into your hands I commit my spirit...'*. Now, the word for 'hand' in Hebrew specifically means 'the right hand', which was the right hand of favour. In many cultures today (noticeably in Africa), the right hand is still used to indicate favour; for example, people offer and receive gifts using the right hand, to indicate good faith and full acceptance.

Now when Jesus offered himself for us on the Cross, he quoted this Psalm as an expression of His submission to the will of the Father. Jesus would have known that he was submitting Himself into God's 'right' hand, the hand of God's favour and grace. In saying these words, Jesus knew His sacrifice was received by the Father, and it is good to know that Scripture confirm this. It is a welcome point, even though it comes from a very strange use of words!

Trust in the Lord - verse 14

The beginning of our passage today, verse 14 of Psalm 31, follows on from verse 5 by expressing complete confidence in God. The two verses work at the heart of the psalm to focus it on trust and faith; *'But as for me, I will trust in You, O Lord; I say, "You are my God"'* (31:14). This confidence is the key to the very practical statements about faith which make up the rest of the Psalm (31:14-24). Also, please remember that when the Old Testament uses the word 'trust', it means something very similar to what we mean by 'faith' from a New Testament perspective; the two words go hand in hand. Before the time of Christ, Israelites certainly expressed what we call 'faith' through their 'trust' in the Lord their God, who made the whole world and who through Abraham, chose His people Israel. When they called people to 'trust in the Lord', this meant something very similar to what we might term a 'call to faith'.

Today, we tend to think of faith as a wide range of things; love, confidence, faithfulness and endurance, for example. In addition, faith in God implies a relationship with Him. An Israelite of Old Testament times would mean almost the same by saying 'I trust in the Lord'; this was their testimony. If we now look at the reading for today, it reads much like a personal testimony of trust in God. It is perhaps David's great testimony of faith.

Who does God 'put to shame'?

This wide range of testimony begins in verse 15; *'for my time of deliverance lies in your hands'*, words which show confidence in the Lord to overcome all enemies. When David then asks, *'let me not be put to shame ...'* (31:17) it is not his own personal will that he seeks to uphold. He has already submitted his will to Almighty God, and therefore knows by keeping close to the will of God, he will be saved from the dishonour of sin and shame. Rather, the emphasis in this verse is on the fact that God does shame the wicked (31:17) and He silences those who lie, or who treat others with pride or contempt (31:18). Enlightened by the mercy of God in whom he has put his trust, David is clearly concerned not about his own honour, but that of God's people as a whole; the *'righteous'* (31:18). He is asking the Lord to root out sin within His people so that they might be pure before their God (31:17,18)

God's ways not the world's ways; openness not secrecy

In verses 19 and 20, there is more evidence of David's personal testimony and of His faith that God will bless His people. He boasts that God has *'set aside'* (31:19) His *'goodness'* for those who trust Him (31:20). He draws a contrast between the transparency of God's great love for His people and the *'conspiracies of others'* (31:20), and speaks of the way in which the Lord protects His people from slander and false accusation. Bearing in mind that this psalm was designed to be read by out loud in worship, it is possible that these verses were a warning by which God's people were told they must be careful to reflect the love of God in their words and deeds. Life is not to be a matter of 'conspiracies' and 'strife' (31:20), but to be open and transparent. Shady dealing is bad enough when encountered in the world at large, but when it is practiced amongst God's people it is a scandal.

The faithful love of God

Psalm 31 concludes with a resounding call to faith and trust in the Lord who has revealed Himself to Israel in a Covenant of *'faithful love'* (31:21). David's sense of the love of God is that it is so pure, he is not worthy of this great privilege, *'in my alarm I said, I am cut off from your sight'* (31:22), but realises that to think this is wrong. He is called to walk the path of his ancestors in faith, and to call out to the God of his salvation (31:22). He calls out to God's people to do the same; he says *'love the Lord, all you His saints'*, meaning all those who honour God and follow His ways. In the last verse, David appeals for all God's people to take heart because of God's love and compassion, and he delivers a call to action using words

with which he was familiar from his many battles '*be bold, be strong, for the Lord your God is with you ...*' (Josh 1:9).

Trust in the one true God

As we reach the end of the psalm, its final verses seem to say that the enemy in this psalm is the enemy within. David is challenging Israelites from their own community who have lost trust and faith in God and have begun to live a life that does not reflect God's grace. The whole psalm is therefore an appeal to God's people to hold on to their trust in the one true God who has chosen them and loves them. It implies that many had deserted the truth about their God, and needed to hear this call, and certainly, if you read the books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles you will find that this was true during many periods of Israelite history. David's psalm was a challenge to God's people of Old Testament times, and it now transcends time as part of God's Word to us today, challenging people of faith to this day.

Discipleship

Application

Remaining true to God

The call to exclusive faith in the one true God is important for us to hear, even today. Many within the church have taken the tragic road of mixing historic Christianity with the common philosophies and religions of our age. The result is often the abandonment of our Christian heritage in favour of trying to create something new, when our real task is to proclaim the consistent love of God in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. Over the centuries, the Christian faith has been practiced in widely different ways by communities of people throughout the world. Yet the common features of all Christian faith are God's revelation through Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the heritage of faith in which we stand. These have remained consistent throughout all the centuries of immense cultural change. The church and its unique faith in God, His Son, our Saviour Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit is a miracle in itself.

Cultural problems today

Unfortunately, many people in Western culture today tend to think of God as the same for all religions, and assume that Christianity and Hinduism and the Muslim faith, for example, are all ways of trying to find the one God. It is easy to run with such a theory, that is, until you examine what these differing religions actually say about God (or gods). In truth, there is no other religion that says God became flesh in a human being and fought to break open the barriers between God and people so that we might find peace with God. No other religion presents a God who wants to love His people in a way that is commonly comprehensible.

I suggest that God's people stand close to their heritage of faith, and one of the ways of doing this is to read the psalms and allow them to help us connect with God. The psalms teach us what it means to believe in the one true God who love us and wants the best for us, despite the problems of our lives, and this is certainly true for Psalm 31. All this sounds very simple, and it can be; we do not have to make our faith more complicated than it need be. If we have problems with our faith or we need to explore what we believe then so be it, but God stands waiting to receive us back to Himself. He does not change.

Ideas for what to do

- Would you say of yourself that your faith is secure and that you know where you 'stand' before God? One test of faith is to read psalm 31 and see whether it makes sense to you. Read through the whole of the passage again and write down what it says to you about the God in whom you believe.
- Pray for the church, and for those who seek to lead it forward, that they will have the courage to hold fast to the historic faith as well as be pioneers who explore new worlds.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. When you read Psalm 31:14-24, what is the foremost theme that comes to your mind, and is it represented within the study?
2. What does this psalm teach you about the oGs I n who you believe?
3. Discuss in your group what 'Trust in the Lord' means to you, and give practical examples.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, I love You and accept all You have done for me. Strengthen me in my faith and give me the courage to live by Your Word. Where I do not understand things, make me brave enough to accept my own limitations and turn to You for guidance and direction. Thank You Lord, with all my heart. **AMEN**