

Psalms of David

Psalm 31, My Times are in Your Hand

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

In our everyday conversations with friends and acquaintances, we engage in a range of subjects. We may ask about their general health and perhaps their views on current affairs. We very rarely delve beyond the superficial. In our communication with God, the highest privilege that we have amongst all of His creatures, we can not only speak to Him about anything and everything but we can also learn a great deal from His dealings with humanity throughout history to the present, as we find in His Word, the Bible. At the centre of the Bible is the Book of Psalms and as someone put it: "This great collection of songs and prayers expresses the heart and soul of humanity. In them we find the whole range of human experiences expressed. David and the other writers honestly poured out their true feelings, reflecting a dynamic, powerful, and life-changing friendship with God. The psalmists confess their sins, express their doubts and fears, ask God for help in times of trouble, and praise and worship Him." (1)

"The Book of Psalms" has been called "The Prayer and Praise Book of Israel", but, of course, the Psalms are not the exclusive property of that favoured nation. Believers of all ages have sung them and have revelled in the sweetness of these inspired songs. [...] There is praise and prophecy; there is duty and devotion; there is grief and gladness; there is joy and sorrow, tragedy and triumph, tears and laughter, trial and trust. [...] The [Lord Jesus] Himself, however, has provided the key to the most profitable of all meditations, that is to find Christ in the Psalms. [...] On that memorable first day of the week on the way to Emmaus, and later in Jerusalem in the midst of His disciples, He showed those early believers that He was in all the Scriptures, and He made special reference to the Psalms (Luke 24:27, 44)." (2)

"One of the remarkable features of the Psalms is that they are testament to the individual but, the clearest impression left is not of the people themselves but of God: His proper place in the lives of those who call upon Him. In this respect, the Psalms are the Old Testament in miniature: the Lord is the Creator (Psalms 8, 104) [... this] is the ground for His present sovereign rule over all things as King (Psalms 29, 96 - 99). The righteousness of His rule is predominant (Psalms 11, 75). [The Lord is Shepherd both to His people as a whole (Psalm 80) and to the individual (Psalm 23), the basis of confidence in looking to Him for deliverance (Psalms 16, 25, 31), recognising His attentiveness to His people's needs (Psalms 3, 27)]." (3)

So, with regard to Psalm 31. Some scholars have indicated that the psalm can be attributed to the time when David fled from Saul into the wilderness of Maon (1 Samuel 23:24-25). Others attribute it to the time of his deliverance from being shut up in Keilah - according to the Septuagint – The Greek Translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the title of the psalm is "For the end, a Psalm of David, an utterance of extreme fear." In 1 Samuel 23, David learns that the Philistines are attacking a city called Keilah, (mentioned in Nehemiah as one of the cities resettled by those returning from Babylonian exile), he enquires of the Lord and is instructed to defend the city, which he does successfully. Despite David's rescue, the inhabitants of Keilah later planned to hand David over to Saul who was pursuing David. We see in this background story, a place where

David's faith and reliance in God are tested; it also highlights themes of divine protection and the unfolding of God's purposes.

Perhaps appropriately, a headline title to the Psalm reads:

"The confidence of the godly man when in the depth of distress that he will be delivered from all his enemies by the righteousness of God" (4)

And so, as we examine Psalm 31 in detail, we will consider it under two main ways:

1. The selected themes of the Psalm.
2. A lesson from Psalm 31 Verse 15.

David's many enemies were determined to destroy him. This made up a force outwardly that David could not handle on his own and he was not reluctant to recognise this. More importantly, he casts himself completely on God as his shield and defender. So let us look at some themes in this Psalm.

Verses 1 to 4 - petitions and praises

I will be reading from the New King James Version of the Scriptures except where I will state otherwise.

In You, O LORD, I put my trust; let me never be ashamed; deliver me in Your righteousness. Bow down Your ear to me, deliver me speedily; be my rock of refuge, a fortress of defence to save me. For You are my rock and my fortress; therefore, for Your name's sake, lead me and guide me. Pull me out of the net which they have secretly laid for me, for You are my strength.

In this, David is expressing trust in the face of trial by asking the Lord to be his rock. David has taken refuge in God alone, verse 1. David appeals for deliverance and guidance. There are echoes of this in David's other psalms, e.g., Psalm 16:1 and 71:1. His enemies had set a trap, but God was his strength and would deliver him from it. He prays that in his trusting he might never be disappointed. Appealing to the Lord to bow down to hear him is an acknowledgement both of God's greatness and David's lowliness. This is the right approach in our communication with God.

Verses 5 - 8: cause for confidence

Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD God of truth. I have hated those who regard useless idols; but I trust in the LORD. I will be glad and rejoice in Your mercy, for You have considered my trouble; You have known my soul in adversities, and have not shut me up into the hand of the enemy; You have set my feet in a wide place.

David's words in verse 5 have found an echo in the dying moments of many a saint, but in fact he was using them in relation to his life rather than his death. The Lord Jesus used these words when dying on the cross, Luke 23:46, but there are important differences which I will add as a footnote to the transcript of this Talk on our website. David was surrounded by trouble as already stated in the above verses. So here, in verse 5, it was for the preservation of his life that he entrusted himself to God. The grounds for his confidence were found in the fact that God had redeemed him, (his past deliverances) and in the known character of God, God being "the God of truth." So David laid his spirit as his most precious deposit, into the custody of One who could take care of it while he was still living. He believed that God was able to keep that which he had committed unto Him.

A hymn writer, perhaps echoing these sentiments, wrote:

“I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded, that
He is able, to keep that which I have committed unto
Him, against that Day...”

D W Whittle (1883 - 1901).

It is also interesting to note that David refers to “useless idols” in verse 6. He clearly wanted to contrast his total devotion to God with the emptiness of idol worship and the pagan religious rituals which were never completely banished from Israel and Judah.

Obviously, a person who clings to his idols, be they like today’s idols of wealth, material possessions, success, and puts them first in their lives, cannot expect God’s Spirit to guide them. God is our highest authority and requires our first allegiance.

Verses 9 - 13 helplessness and hopelessness

Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I am in trouble; my eye wastes away with grief, yes, my soul and my body! For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. I am a reproach among all my enemies, but especially among my neighbours, and am repulsive to my acquaintances; those who see me outside flee from me. I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel. For I hear the slander of many; fear is on every side; while they take counsel together against me, they scheme to take away my life.

This is a sorry state of affairs! David is depicting himself in a very low place, as we might say. He felt forgotten as if he were dead, out of mind and, as useless as a broken vessel. Then there was the slander, the whispering, the backbiting, which somehow came to his ears. Basically, he had become the butt of insult and ridicule. In describing his feelings, David wrote of the helplessness and hopelessness everyone feels when hated or rejected. Job, a great man from the past, hit rock bottom after many adversaries shattered his life. He did not follow his wife’s advice to curse God, though he cursed the day he was born, Job 3:1. How often do we shun a person who is going through a real misfortune? It certainly happened to Paul, the Apostle. He shares with Timothy that all his friends left him...

We are not alone in our adversity. The Apostle could affirm that the Lord stood with him, see 2 Timothy 4:16 – 17. God is with us all along the road regardless of how rough it may be. True adversity is easier when we recognise our true relationship with the sovereign God. We will see in our next section how David reaffirms his trust in God. And so to,

A lesson from Psalm 31 Verse 15.

Verses 14 - 18: My Times are in Your Hand

But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD; I say, You are my God. My times are in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me. Make Your face shine upon Your servant; save me for Your mercies’ sake. Do not let me be ashamed, O LORD, for I have called upon You; let the wicked be ashamed; let them be silent in the grave. Let the lying lips be put to silence, which speak insolent things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous.

It is not often we find it necessary to draw attention to the difference that one single letter can make, especially its position in a word or phrase! In this case, the place of the letter “s” in the title of today’s Talk needs to be highlighted. The word TIMES, plural, is used instead of TIME, singular, and HAND, singular, instead of HANDS, plural. Our lives consist of a timeline of events, not only in terms of age, i.e., from youth through maturity to old age but also even on a daily basis.

They are fixed by God. We have no choice in the matter. What we have a choice over is to accept that while the times are many, the hand is one! Our times change, as we move from one phase of our earthly life to another, but the hand is unchanging. Every believer can say with David, 'You are my God. My times are in your hand.'

In the statement of verse 15, David was expressing his belief that all of life's circumstances are under God's control. Knowing that God loves and cares for us enables us to keep steady in our faith regardless of our circumstances. It keeps us from sinning foolishly by taking matters into our own hands or refusing to accept God's timetable. It seems that David could not bear the thought of being given over to the hand of the enemy, but he was completely at peace with the knowledge that his times were in God's hand. So, in this text, we learn of submission to the will of God.

Similar words were spoken by Stephen when he was stoned to death, see Acts 7: 59. On the cross, the Lord took up these words of David, see Luke 23: 46. The Lord committed His spirit by an act of His own free will. See also the Footnote as I mentioned earlier.

There are many references in the Psalms to the hand of the Lord. The two occurrences here in Psalm 31 vv. 5, 15, are set against two mentions of the hand of David's enemies, vv. 8, 15, which were of no match in comparison. This is always so. The hand of the Lord is not only strong, Psalm 89: 13, but it is also a shepherding hand, Psalm 95:7. David, the shepherd king, knew the reality of this, Psalm 23:1-2. We, too, have a Shepherd, out of whose hand none can pluck us, John 10: 28. We see from all these Scriptures that our spirit and our times can only be committed to God by our own free will. In doing so, we surrender ourselves wholly and forever to God's will. We should thereafter appreciate that once we have committed our times into His hand, we ought to express our dependence on Him, not on man nor thing. This sense of dependence should keep us in the attitude of prayer. As I said in the opening remarks, prayer is the greatest privilege we have.

We have seen how David demonstrated his dependence on the Lord. He knew where to flee for protection; he knew to whom he fled; he knew that he could tell all his woes to God, just as they were and leave absolutely all with God. It seems also that David did not end with moans but with the words turned to song, as we see in the next section.

Verses 19 - 24: Cause for praise and call to praise

Oh, how great is Your goodness, which You have laid up for those who fear You, which You have prepared for those who trust in You in the presence of the sons of men! You shall hide them in the secret place of Your presence from the plots of man; You shall keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues. Blessed be the LORD, for He has shown me His marvellous kindness in a strong city! For I said in my haste, I am cut off from before Your eyes; nevertheless You heard the voice of my supplications when I cried out to You. Oh, love the LORD, all you His saints! For the LORD preserves the faithful, and fully repays the proud person. Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all you who hope in the LORD.

In this section, David is extolling the greatness of God's goodness like a treasure store in which goodness and gladness, grace and glory, prosperity and joy are laid up as a treasure for those who fear Him. These things are hidden from unbelieving people, from the hostile world. David is also showing that those who fear the Lord are also "hidden" in the safety of His presence. He, the Lord, is the refuge in times of trouble. Although our enemies may seem to have the upper hand, they are ultimately the ones who are the helpless and hopeless ones. Those who know God will be victorious in the end, verse 23. We can have courage today because God will preserve us. And so, David calls on others to love the Lord and hope in Him.

As we come to the end of our study of Psalm 31, I trust that we have been able to see that the Psalmists were people of the same nature as ourselves, facing the same kind of life as we and finding that their God is the same unchanging God, who is now disclosed to us in Christ, and who can be relied upon in the ups and downs of life. They were clearly prayerful people and people of song who marked their significant moments in song. It is only through the prayer of faith that we can enjoy the deliverance from our God in troubled times. We should be thankful for the wealth experiences recorded for us in the Psalms and other Old testament Scriptures.

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope (Romans 15:4).

Our times are in God's Hand in this sense, we do not have control of neither our lifespan nor of the things that happen around us which impact on our lives. In fact, we do well to trust God in every aspect of our lives whether they be prosperous, trying, glad or sad.

One hymn writer put it like this:

Our times are in Thy hand,
Father we wish them there;
Our life, our soul, our all, we leave
Entirely to Thy care.

Our times are in Thy hand,
Whatever they may be,
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright,
As best may seem to Thee.

Our times are in Thy hand
Why should we doubt or fear?
A Father's hand will never cause
His child needless tear.

Our times are in Thy hand;
Jesus once crucified,
Now leads His own with tender care,
Shepherd, Guard and Guide

Our times are in Thy hand;
Christ is our Advocate;
No creature power from love divine
Our souls can separate.

Our times are in Thy hand;
We'd always trust in Thee;
Till we have left this weary land,
And all Thy glory see.

(W F Lloyd 1791 - 1853)

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today Talk "Psalm 31", Talk Number T1430, in the Series, Psalms of David."

Footnotes:

(1) Chronological Life Application Study Bible, King James Version, page 1806, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 2007

(2) J Flanigan, Psalms, page 13, What the Bible Teaches, Ritchie Old Testament Commentaries, John Ritchie Ltd, Kilmarnock Scotland, 2001.

(3) New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition, page 487, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1994.

(4) Hamilton Smith, Psalms, page 51, Believers Bookshelf Inc., Canada, 1995.

Footnote:

On Psalms 31:5

These words were made His own by the Lord Jesus when dying on the cross, Luke 23 :46. But there are differences we must note. The Lord Jesus prefaced the Psalmist's words with the word "Father." It was a word ever on His lips, from His first recorded words in the temple, Luke 2: 49, to His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mark 14: 36. It had prefaced His first cry from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do", Luke 23: 34, and now His final words. He died as He had lived with that name on His lips.

The second point to note is that He omitted the words with which the Psalmist closed the verse, "Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord of truth" (KJV). The Psalmist was coming to God as a sinner who had received redemption, the Lord Jesus was returning to His Father as Himself the Redeemer. He had been delivered into far different hands, Matthew 17: 22,23; 26: 45,50; Acts 2: 23, and how they had ill-treated Him, Matthew 26: 67; Mark 14: 65; Luke 22: 63-64; John 18: 22; 19:1-3.

He was God in the presence of men, and this is how we treated Him. His Father's hands were those in which His sheep may safely lie, John 10: 29, and into whose loving hands He now commends Himself. Blessed hands! There is no security except as we commit all into the hands of God."

From : "His dying words", Day by Day, Christ Foreshadowed, page 208, Precious Seed Publications, Neath, UK, 2002.

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