

Praying the Psalms, Part 2 (Psalm 31)

Please turn if you would to Ps 31 and if you weren't with us last week, you really need to get that message on our website or you can request a CD for the first part on power for our prayer life in the psalms. I heard from several of you it's been as practical and helpful as it has been for me. I pray this will be further help with God's help, tonight not going all over the psalms, but taking a specific psalm. I mentioned the start of this year I started with Ps 1 on January 1, praying for my faith, my friends, family, fellowship, etc., using the verses and truths in Ps 1 to help me pray. Then on January 2nd my prayer time included Ps 2 (last week we saw how the NT church prayed the words of Ps 2 and applied them to the difficulty they were facing). I've kept up the pattern each day, at least 5-10 minutes praying a psalm usually in the morning, but it's easy to do more with the psalms or to continue other times in the day, using the psalm of the day. Today is the 31st so tonight I'll use the 31st psalm as a template to pray through (Lord-willing I'll keep going to the next psalm each day this year, at least 1 a day, and I hope you'll join me)

David prays in Ps 31:1 *In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!* ² *Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!* ³ *For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;* ⁴ *you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge.* ⁵ *Into your hand I commit my spirit...*[Jesus prayed that on cross]

Let's pause there in our reading but will walk through the rest later. Praying the words of the psalms is not some new technique, Jesus Himself prayed the words of this psalm on the cross and also the words of Ps 22:1 *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...'* There's every reason to think Jesus at least silently prayed all of Ps 22 after that, because all of Ps 22 is clearly words of Messiah on the cross. Jesus prayed the psalms. Hebrews 2 quotes 2 other psalms that Jesus prayed. Last week we spent time in Acts 4 where the early church prayed word-for-word from 2 different psalms then applied those words in their own words to affirm God's attributes and ask His help. Acts 4 highlights the power of their prayer, we have the same power source!

The words in v. 5 Jesus prayed were also prayed back to Jesus as Stephen died in Acts 7. Many martyrs in church history prayed it. Jonah prayed with the language of v. 6 as well as v. 22 and other psalms. Jonah 2, Daniel 9, Nehemiah 8, and in Luke's gospel Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon all pray using verses or phrases or words from the psalms applied to their situations.

R.C. Sproul says the first followers of Jesus were taught to pray in psalms.¹ ‘Most Christians for most of the Christian centuries have learned to pray by praying the Psalms. The Hebrews, with several centuries of a head start on us in matters of prayer and worship, provided us with this prayer book that gives us a language adequate for responding to the God who speaks to us.’²

Athanasius, church father famous for defending the Trinity at Nicea 325 AD ‘no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance of confession, or help in trouble and temptation or under persecution, whether ... sad for any reason, or whether...you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord, each of these things the divine psalms show you how to do, and in every case the words you want are written down for you so that you can say them as your own.’ Athanasius also explained: ‘the Psalms have a unique place in the Bible because most of the Scripture speaks *to us*, while the Psalms speak *for us*.’³

In the medieval church in Constantine there was a time you couldn't become a minister if you weren't regularly reciting psalms.⁴ This psalm, in particular 31:5, was the dying prayer of Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, John Huss. Luther called all psalms a school of prayer where Christians ‘learn to pray ...for here he can hear how the saints talk with God. The number of moods which are expressed here, joy and suffering, hope and care, make it possible for every Christian to find himself in it, and to pray with the psalms.’⁵

George Muller in the 1800s, a man known for his great faith and prayer life, wrote he really struggled in prayer but praying this way was a breakthrough. His biographer writes that a secret of Muller's life was praying the scripture. He found 'great blessing in such meditation and prayer over a single psalm ... this habit is a constant reminder and recognition of the need of spiritual teaching in order to the understanding of the holy [Bible] ... and dependence on their Author for insight ... such a habit naturally leads to self-searching and comparison of the actual life with the example and pattern shown in the Word. The precept compels the practice to be seen in the light of its teaching; the command challenges the conduct to appear for examination. The prayer, whether spoken or unspoken, will inevitably be: “*Search me, O God, and know my heart, Try me, and know my thoughts; And see if there be any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting!*” (Psalm 139:23–24.) ...

But perhaps the greatest advantage will be that the Holy Scriptures will thus suggest the *very words* which become the dialect of prayer. “We know not what we should pray for as we ought”—neither *what* nor *how* to pray. But here is the Spirit’s own inspired utterance [to help our prayer life]”⁶

In the 20th century during WW2, a German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was sustained in a Nazi prison by praying the psalms. One of the last books he wrote before he was arrested for his faith was *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*. It gave ‘one of the secrets behind the powerful witness of his life. He had learned to pray the Psalms and from them drew on the power of God in his years of imprisonment.’⁷ If there’s any question if this is practical, if it really works when living in a concentration camp, your life wasting away, v. 9 is a prayer a man after God’s heart that Bonhoeffer could pray from his: *‘Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also.’*¹⁰ *For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away...¹² I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel...²² I had said in my alarm, I am cut off from your sight. But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help.*

We’re not in as drastic a situation as he was, or as David was when he wrote this, but like v. 9 we need to pray asking for grace, we face distress, too, and don’t know where to turn, but we can turn to the psalms that help us turn to the Lord in prayer. The Spirit helps us when we don’t know to pray and one of His means to help groaning hearts pray as they ought is Spirit-inspired psalms. v. 10 is for you when in sorrow, the next time you sigh or strength fails you because of sin. If you ever feel forgotten, pray v. 12 like David did and if you feel like a broken vessel, useless, pray to God. v. 22 says after he prayed those ways in his alarm and concern God replied by mercy and help. He prayed for mercy in v. 9 and God heard and heeded that prayer by v. 22. And he even practiced v. 7 *‘I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love’*

It was said of Bonhoeffer, ‘Even during his last days, spent in the prisons of the Third Reich, [he] found himself sustained by ... prayer ... the deep and nurturing resource of Scripture in general, and the Psalms in particular. As Bonhoeffer said, “[t]he more deeply we grow into the psalms and the more often we pray them as our own, the more simple and rich will our prayer become.” ... a British officer... with Bonhoeffer during the last few days of Bonhoeffer's life, writes: “Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive... He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom his God was real and close.”’⁸

Joni Eareckson I’ve seen in person display great joy despite her paralysis, but she’s admitted she’s often not there and praying the psalms revives her.

She points to Ps 119:93 that tells God in prayer the word has revived me. If you need fresh life in your prayer life, pray 119:25 *'give me life according to your Word.'* If you need fresh fire to kindle your spirit in the morning, if your prayer life has grown cold and needs igniting, if your heart has become hard like a rock, she points to Jer 23:29 *"'Is not my word like fire,' declares the Lord, 'is it not like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?'"* Joni says: 'I love that! God's Word is like a hammer that breaks through your unbelief. God's Word is like a fire that sets your heart aflame. Ask God to teach you to use all of His Word as a powerful tool in your prayers ... read portions of Scripture to prime your pump before prayer; let the Spirit lead you to certain verses to use in your praise and intercessions ... develop personal prayers...enriched by those same verses...It's like speaking His language'⁹

It's one thing for me in good health to stand up here and preach on praying the psalms, but what if you're a quadriplegic with chronic pain and cancer? Joni posted on her blog: 'I get nervous and have questions (like, how much assault can my quadriplegic body take?), but...Jesus knew that we would have questions. To prepare us for them, He urged us to abide in His love (John 15:9) [and abide in His Word and in prayer for joy]...Early tomorrow morning Ken and I will head to the clinic for my third round of chemo... when the nurse starts the infusion, Ps 31:14-15 will be on my lips, *"I trust in you O Lord; I say: 'You are my God. My times are in your hands.'"* My time battling this cancer is in His hand-I can't think of a safer place to be!'¹⁰

As she prayed that Psalm in 2010 it sustained her, and in 2013 I saw her in person give her testimony at StrangeFire, and there was a joy about her that would seem strange to the world, she seemed to be the most on fire for the Lord in the room singing in her wheelchair, like v. 7 of Ps 31 also says: *'I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul...[it's a choice to rejoice]*

John Piper is probably best known for desiring God, spreading a passion for the supremacy of God's glory in all things for the joy of all people. But he's confessed how weak his spiritual life gets if he doesn't pray out of Scripture. He says 'if I try to pray for people or events without having the word in front of me guiding my prayers, then several negative things happen. One is that I tend to be very repetitive...and I just pray the same things all the time. Another negative thing is that my mind tends to wander, and I think instead about what I'm wearing, or that there is a Venetian blind that is halfway open, or that there is a siren...I'm all over the place by my inattentiveness.

But the Bible holds my attention because I'm looking at it and reading it. And it gives me biblical things to pray for so that I'm not praying with empty and vague requests like "God bless them" and "God bless that." Rather, I'm asking for specific things that the Bible commends. For me, it is absolutely essential that my prayers be guided by, saturated by, sustained and controlled by the word of God ... Some people wonder how you can pray longer than five minutes, because they would lose things to pray for. But I say ... open the Bible, start reading it, and pause at every verse and turn it into a prayer'¹¹ [you'll run out of time before prayer ammo runs out]

If we look at those God has used in the present and past, if so many spiritual giants in church found help praying the psalms, there can be help for me, a spiritual shorty! If praying with an open Bible helped George Muller be a man of great faith and prayer, if it helped Joni Eareckson have joy, or John Piper to have passion, or helped Bonhoeffer be grateful in a death camp, it can help me and it can help you! Paul sang psalms in prison and spoke of a Spirit-filled Word-filled Christian as speaking psalms in worship to God. If the early church found power praying psalms like Acts 4 shows, if Mary the mother of Jesus prayed psalms as Christ was formed in her, if Simeon and Zechariah and Jonah and Daniel and Nehemiah expressed their prayers that way in inspired Scripture for us to learn from, and if Jesus Himself prayed psalms to the very end of His life, we can learn from them for our prayers.

Review last week's prayer challenge (be doers of Word, not hearers only):

1. Try praying through a psalm each day this next week (if you can, find a prayer place where you can out loud or quietly uninterrupted)
 - if you're already have a reading/praying plan try adding this to part of it, at least 5-10 minutes let a psalm inform prayer
 - look for verses that are prayers, or biblical truths you can turn into prayers to God. If a verse or a whole psalm is hard to pray, move on to next verse or next psalm across the page

Rejoice: What do I find here that gives me cause to rejoice or thank God?

Ps 31:5b '*... you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.*
 ...⁷ *I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love ...*'

Repent: What do I read here that brings to light sin in my life to repent of?

⁶ *I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols ...* ¹⁰ *my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity ...* Keep in mind the psalms are honest about sin but not everything in them is where your heart should be (iniquity, hate, etc)

Psalms include complaints and imbalanced perspectives, every range of our emotions as humans, including some verses where the heart isn't in a right frame of mind but if you keep reading the psalm, their heart gets refocused (ex: Ps 139 speaks of hating enemies then asks God to search our heart and for any hurtful way in me to lead me in the way everlasting, v. 21-24 NAS).

As you read the psalms, when you come to verses with hate, anger, despair, depression, bitter-sounding words, don't get hung up there and stop reading. Keep reading the rest of the psalm and Bible (love your enemies). If you're struggling, talk to God honestly about it for help, confess you struggle or sin and pray based on what is clear, but don't stop praying for what's less clear. Look for something in it you can pray with understanding, truth about God.

Request: What in this psalm can inform the way I pray for me or others?¹²

- v. 1: pray for your loved one to take refuge in the Lord in their trial
- v. 3b: for someone needing leading, guiding, pray it in Jesus' name

2. I also challenged last week to think of categories you normally pray for (friends, family, fellowship, future, etc.) and pray for them using the psalms and pray for other things that come to mind as you read the psalm of the day

- v. 5 '*you redeemed...*' ask God to redeem a friend/family member
- v. 13 mentions terror – pray for persecuted brethren under terrorism
- v. 14 makes me think of people who need to trust in the Lord as God
- there's prayers for justice in the middle of v. 17, 18, end of v. 23, etc
- reading v. 24 makes me think of people at church to pray for in need of strength, an encouraged heart, and hope, so I pray God gives that

3. I asked if you're doing it, if it helps, send a text or email on how it's going
- any challenges or questions, I can try to answer next week

One challenge that came up is imprecatory psalms for God to deal with His enemies. We need to remember we're not an OT King at war, NT warfare is spiritual. Tim Keller says: 'calls for justice are absolutely right, and remind us how important God's holiness and justice are. But secondly, recognize that the Psalmists did not have the justice of God completely satisfied in Christ. Thus we pray for our enemies, not wish them ill. Yet we as Christians can pray these Psalms as longings for social justice and hatred against the "power and principalities" behind the world.'¹³

- share any encouraging things you're finding as you pray psalms

Don Whitney has taught this hundreds of times and people who apply it for a few minutes testify surprise: my mind didn't wander, it seemed like a real conversation with a real person, the psalm of the day spoke directly to a life situation I'm in right now, I thought more deeply about what the Bible says, I prayed about things I normally don't pray about, I prayed about the things I normally do pray about but in new and different ways, for the first time in a long time I didn't say the same old things about the same old things, I had greater assurance I was praying God's will, my prayer was more about God and less about me, and the most common surprise: the time was too short!¹⁴

- if you pray a verse for a friend that may help them, share it

Is there practical help here for a mom with a little baby or an elderly person or teen or someone who struggles with sadness, bitterness, or lack of peace, or someone struggling to sleep because of negative emotions or memories, or a married couple trying to rebuild? I know it can because they told me so:

- 14 hours after last Sunday night's message someone already texted me 'I started this morning [Jan. 25] going to Ps 25 to start. It was so appropriate to me on this day – I had no problem personalizing it. Looking forward to tomorrow to see how it applies!' I texted back Praise the Lord! I was praying Ps 25 when u texted and am looking forward to see how He works through prayer this week. Who is this?
- A mom wrote the next day of her devotional reading thru Scripture: 'something was missing. And this has been it. I now leave my Psalm for the end, to read through and then use to guide my prayer time... I've been praying aloud and have found, as you said, that it really helps corral a thought life that tends to run wild ... using the Psalm of the day [helps] draw my prayers to greater praise of God and His attributes and to seek greater things from Him, as well as to return thanks for the many issues that the psalms take up in turn'
- The next day someone wrote 'This has had a major impact on my last few days. It has focused me more on God's concern and desire for me and less of man's judgement. And that leads me to continue to desire to please God and God alone. Some action has resulted ...'
- When praying through battle-related psalms one insightfully wrote: 'they remind me of my profound privilege in living on land that never sees physical battle in the form of war and reminds me to pray for those who take up the case of democracy and freedom in my behalf on foreign soil. Psalm 17 today reminded me... Truly, praying the Psalms expands the prayer life and for that, I am so grateful!'

- I'll close with a final encouraging testimony: 'It has changed my prayer life, and so God began revealing more sin in my life as I prayed for others through the Psalms [on the 4th day wrestling with anger and unable to sleep the 4th Psalm spoke] *Be angry, & do not sin, meditate within your heart on your bed, & be still, Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, & put your trust in the Lord. You have put gladness in my heart, I will both lie down in peace & sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.* I just couldn't believe that God would so personally speak to me like that and knew I ... needed to turn from that [sin] and praise Him for who He is and how He loves me so ... God is so good to us and I am so encouraged by His Word and am praying God will enlighten more eyes in our church to praying through the Psalms as He trains our hands for war, and finger for battles of the flesh around and within us.'

¹ 'We might expect Jesus to begin by saying, "Pray the psalms." He probably did not do so because the disciples, having been trained in the synagogues, already knew to pray the psalms. If Jesus were with us today though, he might begin with a reminder to start with the psalms.' *R.C. Sproul, Before the Face of God: Book 4* (Baker Books, 1994), p. 476.

² Eugene Peterson, "Introduction to the Psalms."

³ St. Athanasius, "Letter to Marcellinus," in *Praying the Psalms with the Early Christians*, and Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, p. 50.

⁴ Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: 1-41* (Kregel, 2012), p. 27.

⁵ As quoted by Ronald Barclay Allen, *Praise! A Matter of Life and Breath*, p. 24.

⁶ Arthur T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol* (London: James Nisbet & Co., Limited, 1899), 139–141.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Augsburg, 1974), back cover.

⁸ Carson Reed, "Bonhoeffer and the Psalms," *Leaven* (Winter 1996): p. 30-31.

⁹ Joni Eareckson, "Praying with Scripture," <http://www.joniandfriends.org/radio/5-minute/praying-scripture1/>

¹⁰ <http://www.joniandfriends.org/blog/wed-sept-22nd-update-joni/?page=3>

¹¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/should-i-use-the-bible-when-i-pray>

¹² Ben Patterson, "Five Ways to Pray the Psalms," *Christianity Today*, October 2008.

¹³

http://www.redeemer.com/learn/resources_by_topic/prayer/prayer_and_fasting/praying_the_psalms/

¹⁴ Don Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, chapter 8.