
The Pilgrim's Strong Refuge

Psalms 31²¹

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A cartographer is someone who makes maps. They chart the contours and complexities of the place their eye sees and their hands and art create. The Psalmist David is a cartographer. He is mapping the contours and complexities of the soul. He is bending the words of his art to show us the worth and wonders of God.

Two brothers who called themselves E.S. Posthumus have musically mapped the contours of the heart in an album called *The Cartographer*. Here are some of the most amazing, intricate, tone poems. Every time I listen, I hear something new or experience something different. This Psalm has a similar depth and complexity. So I want us to listen together as we experience this Psalm, first through the heart of its author, King David, a man of God. We will listen to it enveloped in our place and experience in the world.

The Pilgrim as a Man of God

The writer of this Psalm, King David of Israel is:

A Hunted Man (v. 1-5)

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;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

He is a man who is being attacked by enemies who slander his name and seek his life.

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He finds refuge in God who is his defense and his sheltering fortress.

An Afflicted Man (v. 6-8)

⁶ I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the Lord.

⁷ I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have known the distress of my soul,

⁸ and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

He is a man who deeply experiences his life in the world and with God.

He can be deeply distressed in his afflictions and full of delight with God's love.

A Repentant Man (v. 9-10)

⁹ 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.

He is a man who knows the depths of his sins and how they have brought shame to God and to God's people.

As a part of turning away from his sin and to holiness, He experiences and expresses true heartfelt grief over his sin.

An Abandoned Man (v. 11-13)

¹¹ Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,
especially to my neighbors,
and an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹² I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

He is a man who knows what it is like to have people turn away from him and to turn against him.

He rejects a rugged, independent, self-sufficient attitude and is deeply affected by broken relationships.

A Trusting Man (v. 14-18)

¹⁴ But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, "You are my God."
¹⁵ My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!
¹⁶ Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!
¹⁷ O Lord, let me not be put to shame,
for I call upon you;
let the wicked be put to shame;
let them go silently to Sheol.
¹⁸ Let the lying lips be mute,
which speak insolently against the righteous
in pride and contempt.

He is man who does not put his faith in people, but simply trusts in God.

He believes in an obeying way that all of his life's why's and when's and where's and wherefore's are in God's hands.

He affirms the just judgment due the wicked and ascribes to God through prayer the right to bring that judgment.

A Protected Man (v. 19-20)

¹⁹ Oh, how abundant is your goodness,
which you have stored up for those who fear you
and worked for those who take refuge in you,
in the sight of the children of mankind!
²⁰ In the cover of your presence you hide them
from the plots of men;
you store them in your shelter
from the strife of tongues.

He is a man who seeks his safety and security in God because he knows God's goodness and reverences his God.

He understands the power of the tongue to destroy a person. He expects that God will defend him, uphold his name and integrity and keep him safe from the schemes and snares of wicked people.

A Rejoicing Man (v. 21-22)

²¹ Blessed be the Lord,
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me
when I was in a besieged city.
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.

He is a man who rejoices in God's unfailing love and protecting mercies.

He is helped by God even when he feels vulnerable, alone and cut off. God moves in love and mercy to be with and to be around His people in their moments of weakness and trouble.

An Encouraging Man (v. 23-24)

²³ Love the Lord, all you his saints!
The Lord preserves the faithful
but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.

²⁴ Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord!

He is a man who lives his life with God's people and encourages them to love and humility.

He exhorts God's people through praise and preaching to love the Lord and to be strong and courageous. This is the destination of the Psalm. He has related his experience in the world and with God so as to exhort God's people to love, courage and patience.

The Pilgrim as a Man in the World

This Psalm also highlights what it means to live in a fallen world. So the pilgrim is a man of but he is also, a man in the world. This melodic line moves with sharp tones and slow pain. It shows how God's people are to respond to others who sin against them.

When others do evil (v. 1-8)

The Pilgrim trusts God for strength when others do evil.

People will sin against us. They sometimes don't mean to but often it is calculated and plotted out to do harm. God is our refuge and protection in these times. God may not shield us from the harm. He will use the situation to chisel away our sin and folly and to build our graces and virtues.

Listen again to verse 5:

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;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

Did you hear it? The person here finds God to be a fortress, a defense, a guide, a scout, a redeemer and faithful God. Who dies. "Into your hand I commit my spirit..." are Jesus' dying words from the cross.

So Jesus knew His heavenly Father to be all these amazing things and do all these wonderful things when people were sinning against. *Yet He still died on the cross.* Here is the way the Bible thinks about all this. Absolute total trust in the God who planned the evil done against Jesus to bring about the redemption of His people. All that you hear in this Psalm is not about delivering you from the evil people, but transforming you and preserving you spiritually through the situations evil people cause.

When others cause pain (v. 9-18)

The Pilgrim asks God for mercy when others cause pain.

His Anguish (v. 9-10)

Notice the anguish in which he experiences his pain. As helpers we must be careful about either maximizing or minimizing another person's experience of suffering. We who are going through suffering must be careful not to amplify our suffering so as to elicit pity from others. Some Christians just live excruciating lives. This is not what the Psalmist is speaking of and not what I am commending. I am commending that Christian men not pretend to be stoic as though nothing bothers them. If you stunt your emotions, then your emotional life with God will be stunted and you will not cultivate deep, lasting friendships with others.

Their Affect (v. 11-13)

What these others have done has resulted in David feeling alone. He even feels like people are avoiding him and abandoning him. Some are even seeking to destroy him. This is not paranoia – this is a well-grounded fear as a king. From the early days under Saul till the end of his reign, his life was in danger.

His Assurance (v. 14-18)

Here is his strong affirmation of faith. He will trust in God. And so will we. No matter what others may do to us or against us, we will rest in God. He is in sovereign control. He is not just taking random events and working them for our good. He has designed every circumstance of your life. Right now, at this moment, you are in the providential hand of God. That does not mean you are not responsible for your sins – you most certainly are. But it does mean that nothing in your life is outside of God's control. Jesus went to the cross suffering all that evil against Him in the plan and will of God.

When others need encouragement (v. 19-24)

The Pilgrim gives God the glory so that others can see God's victory.

These stanzas close the Psalm with ascribing glory to God and calling God's people to faithfulness. He encourages them in three ways.

He exclaims over the abundance of God's goodness in its public aspect (v. 19-20). The pronouns here are plural. He is addressing God publicly in the hearing of the congregation.

He blesses God for a specific instance of God's rescuing mercy to David personally (v. 21-22). In the midst of a dangerous situation, God helped him when he cried out to God.

He speaks directly to God's people in a transformational, practical call (v. 23-24). Love God. Be strong. Don't give up waiting for the Lord.

What strikes me in all this is that God's help often seems to come in unexpected ways. God's people should not expect that God's answer, God's mercy, God's deliverance brings an end to the trouble. It usually means that God strengthens, sustains and satisfies us so that we grow in faith and grace.

Reflect and Respond

This is David. But this is also our Lord Jesus Christ. And so will it be you?

He is a man who is being attacked by enemies who slander his name and seek his life.

He is a man who deeply experiences his life in the world and with God.

He is a man who knows the depths of his sins and how they have brought shame to God and to God's people.

He is a man who knows what it is like to have people turn away from him and to turn against him.

He is man who does not put his faith in people, but simply trusts in God.

He is a man who seeks his safety and security in God because he knows God's goodness and reverences his God.

He is a man who rejoices in God's unfailing love and protecting mercies.

He is a man who lives his life with God's people and encourages them to love and humility.

The Pilgrim trusts God for strength when others do evil.

The Pilgrim asks God for mercy when others cause pain.

The Pilgrim gives God the glory so that others can see God's victory.