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## Psalm 31: To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David

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**Psalm 31**  
**To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David**  
(Revised Common Lectionary) (RSV)

**Introduction to Psalm 31**

Psalm 31 combines elements of sorrow, statements of trust, thanksgivings, and pleas for the punishment of enemies. This makes it easy to see why some commentators think of this as a composite work. Its basic theme, however, would seem to be one of thanksgiving for deliverance from a variety of dangers and distresses, and perhaps even from siege (see v. 21).

Notice once again how, for example in verse 14, trust is to be placed in the LORD. The LORD, as always in the Psalms, is Yahweh, the God who has entered into the covenant of mercy with His People. He is the God whose mercy the Psalmist can claim, and whose mercy causes the Psalmist to burst forth in a whole series of images for reliable strength. He is the God who in the New Testament further reveals Himself as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, at work among us by His Spirit.

**Vv. 1-5**

- <sup>1a</sup> In thee, O LORD, do I seek refuge;**  
**<sup>1b</sup> let me never be put to shame;** (be embarrassed for trusting in Thee;  
or be humiliated for seeking refuge in Thee;)  
**<sup>1c</sup> in thy righteousness deliver me!**  
**<sup>2</sup> Incline thine ear to me,**  
**rescue me speedily!**  
**Be thou a rock of refuge for me,**  
**a strong fortress to save me!**  
**<sup>3</sup> Yea, thou art my rock and my fortress;**  
**for thy name's sake lead me and guide me,**  
**<sup>4</sup> take me out of the net which is hidden for me,**  
**for thou art my refuge.**  
**<sup>5</sup> Into thy hand I commit my spirit;**  
**thou hast redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.**

Notice the many synonymous verbs for deliverance: seek refuge in the LORD, deliver me, incline thine ear, rescue me, lead me, guide me. Notice also the sturdy images for the reliable character of God: rock of refuge and strong fortress. These recur throughout the Psalms, because in the ancient world they were images of safety and security. Even though these are hardly proof against attack in our day of modern weaponry, they have nevertheless become a part of our Christian, especially Lutheran, vocabulary. We need think only of Martin Luther's hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*.

The Psalmist in verse 3 appeals to God "for Thy Name's sake." That Name is Yahweh. It is an appeal to the God who has revealed Himself by that Name in places like Exodus 20:2, 33:19, and 34:6-7. It is therefore an appeal to the promises that the LORD has signed, as it were, with that Name. This Name of God is not interchangeable, according to Exodus 3:15. *Images* and *metaphors* are interchangeable: God may be alternately a Rock, or a Fortress, or a hammer; or

He may care for us lovingly like a mother. These, however, are not a variety of *names* for God; these rather describe Him and His actions toward us human beings under a variety of *images*. He has identified Himself under only One Name, the Name by which He wills to be known to all generations (Exodus 3:15). And that is the Name by which He bids us, following the Psalmist, to address Him.

The picture of our dilemma in verse 4 is touching. A fowler is one who traps birds with nets. Here we are pictured as a bird trapped in a bird-net, and we ask the LORD to release us from those things which hopelessly trap us and rob us of our God-intended freedom.

Verse 1c plays an important role in our Lutheran heritage. For a long time Luther understood "righteousness" as that attribute of God by which he judges us according to our performance under the Law. God as a righteous God meant that He was a strict and impartial judge. Such an understanding required the merit of full obedience to the Law of God for salvation, and under such a regimen, Luther could see no hope of deliverance. However, he began to understand that God is also the LORD of the promised salvation. He began to see that He is also the God who deals with us, not according to our deserts, but graciously "for His Name's sake." It was a big break-through for Luther to grasp that the righteousness of God by which He delivers us is His gift to us in the Gospel; righteousness is not to be construed as a moral standard which we must measure up to as a condition for our deliverance. Once he saw that "for His Name's sake" God leads us and guides us, he could rejoice in the unconditional promise of deliverance.

The words of verse 5 are especially precious, because they are the final words which Jesus prayed as he died on the cross (Luke 23:46). That is therefore the most important clue for us as we pray this Psalm. In Jesus, the LORD shows Himself to be the God faithful to His covenanted promises; for Jesus' sake God is our faithful Father; in Jesus Christ we may pray this Psalm with the full assurance of faith that He is ours and we are His. We echo these words in the familiar Morning and Evening Prayers of Martin Luther: "For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things."

### **Vv. 6-8**

**<sup>6</sup> Thou hatest those who pay regard to vain (worthless, empty) idols;  
but I trust in the LORD.**

or

**I hate those who pay regard to vain (worthless, empty) idols;  
and I trust in the LORD.**

**<sup>7</sup> I will rejoice and be glad for thy steadfast love,  
because thou hast seen my affliction,  
thou hast taken heed of my adversities,**

**<sup>8</sup> and hast not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;  
thou hast set my feet in a broad place.**

The sense of verse 6 will be either: "You hate idol-worshipper, but I'm not one of them;" or "I hate idol-worshippers, and therefore I trust in Yahweh." In the Bible, if I do not worship Yahweh, I am not merely worshipping a false god, but, what is more, I am placing my trust in a deceptive delusion. I may think I am worshipping "God" and will therefore be "saved;" but the idol as an object of worship, together with the expectation we have of the idol, is a fractional truth at best, an empty illusion at worst. Because Yahweh is the Creator and therefore the only God, Yahweh is also the only God who can save. (See Isaiah 45:21-23).

In verse 7 the steadfast love of Yahweh is the reliable mercy of His covenant of promise. The Psalmist has every confidence that he will experience the joy of that love. The language of distress is conventional, and contains no clue as to what affliction and adversity trouble him. Therefore we may use the language for our own specific distresses. The image especially of verse 8 is that of warfare. The Psalmist feels embattled and hunted, indeed, may in fact be hunted by his enemies. But if he is being hunted and hounded, he is also confident that he is being delivered. It is as though he has been cornered in some narrow confine by his enemies, but the LORD did not allow him to be captured, but gave him instead an escape into a broad place, that is, into a place that offers room to maneuver and to flee.

Again, the enemies are those who tempt us, wittingly or unwittingly, to compromise our worship of the LORD, Yahweh and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as our one and Only Savior God.

**Vv. 9-13**

- <sup>9</sup> Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;  
my eye is wasted from grief, my soul and my body also.**
- <sup>10</sup> For my life is spent with (exhausted from) sorrow,  
and my years with sighing;  
my strength fails because of my misery,  
and my bones waste away.**
- <sup>11</sup> I am the scorn of all my adversaries,  
a horror to my neighbors, (or: especially to my neighbors,)  
an object of dread to my acquaintances;  
those who see me in the street flee from me.**
- <sup>12</sup> I have passed out of mind (been forgotten) like one who is dead;  
I have become like a broken vessel.**
- <sup>13</sup> Yea, I hear the whispering of many –  
terror on every side! –  
as they scheme together against me,  
as they plot to take my life.**

The distress of verse 9 is unspecified, and so again we may itemize our own distresses when we pray this Psalm. Verse 10 uses conventional language to express the Psalmist's suffering, which is then only exacerbated (verses 11-13) when he feels himself abandoned by everyone and left even without friends. He feels as though he were a dead person whom no one any longer remembers (verse 12), like a broken clay pot which is thrown away on the trash heap.

Unless we are to regard the Psalmist as paranoid, we must suppose that there was a large circle of those who schemed with whispered plots against his life, and that is sheer terror on every side. That was the case with David (1000 - 960 B.C.), the author of this Psalm; that was the case with Jeremiah (626 - 586 B.C.; see Jer. 20:10), who incurred the wrath of the priests and prophets of his day for announcing God's impending destruction of Jerusalem; and that was also the case climactically in the plot to kill Jesus. Whether we can pray this part of the Psalm about ourselves may be another question. But, we can pray this in our fellowship with those Christians of other lands who do suffer persecution for the Name of Christ, as, for example, in Africa, where thousands of Christians suffer at the hands of militant Muslims.

### **Vv. 14-18**

- <sup>14</sup> But I trust in thee, O LORD;  
I say, "Thou art my God."**
- <sup>15</sup> My times are in thy hand;  
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors!**
- <sup>16</sup> Let thy face shine on thy servant;  
save me in thy steadfast love!**
- <sup>17</sup> Let me not be put to shame, O LORD,  
for I call on thee;  
let the wicked be put to shame,  
let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.**
- <sup>18</sup> Let the lying lips be dumb,  
which speak insolently against the righteous  
in pride and contempt.**

Verse 15 is a precious verse of self-surrender (see on verse 5 above, and below on pages 5-6). Verse 16 is answered by the familiar second stanza of the Aaronic benediction: The LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. Verses 17-18 ask to be spared humiliation (see verse 1b), that the wicked instead be embarrassed and silenced in death. As so often there is a "them and us;" the righteous are those who trust in the LORD for salvation and deliverance, the wicked are those who despise or reject Yahweh and His People. On both sides of that choice there are consequences, as we discover in the following verses.

### **Vv. 19-20**

- <sup>19</sup> O how abundant is thy goodness,  
which thou hast laid up for those who fear thee,  
and wrought for those who take refuge in thee,  
in the sight of the sons of men!**
- <sup>20</sup> In the cover (shelter) of thy presence thou hidest them  
from the plots of men;  
thou holdest them safe under thy shelter  
from the strife of tongues (verbal battles, insults, or accusations).**

The sheltering and rescuing goodness of God (verse 19) will be publicly manifested.

### **Vv. 21-24**

- <sup>21</sup> Blessed be the LORD,  
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me  
when I was beset as in a besieged city.  
or  
when I was in a time of stress (trouble).**
- <sup>22</sup> I had said in my alarm,  
"I am driven far from thy sight."  
But thou didst hear my supplications,  
when I cried to thee for help.**

The Psalmist fears that he has been thrust beyond the LORD's range of sight and hearing. But he discovers from experience that no one can ever drift beyond His love and care.

**<sup>23</sup> Love the LORD, all you his saints!**

**The LORD preserves the faithful,**

**but abundantly requites** (pays back in full - with interest!) **him who acts haughtily.**

**<sup>24</sup> Be strong, and let your heart take courage,**

**all you who wait** (trustingly hope) **for the LORD!**

One can almost hear Luther's explanation of the First Commandment in these verses: We should fear (verse 19), love (verse 23), and trust in (verse 24) the LORD above all others.

### **The LBW Prayer to accompany Psalm 31:**

(It seems to me that instead of using the generic name for God, as the LBW does, it would be better to address God with His revealed Name, as the Psalm does.)

**(LBW:** God of kindness and truth,)

**WEK:** Heavenly Father, Source of all kindness and truth,

you saved your chosen one, Jesus Christ, and you give your martyrs strength.

Watch over your people who come to you now, and strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you, that they may proclaim your saving acts of kindness in the eternal city; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **A Further Reflection:**

Verse 15a is a unique expression in the Psalter. If you pray it in its context, especially the confession of trust in Yahweh as my God in verse 14, it is profound confession of helplessness and dependence upon God. "My times are in your hand," does not mean simply that it depends upon God how long I live, though it means that too. It means rather that my whole life, and those occasions when things happen that determine my life, are in the hands of a gracious LORD.

Look at the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

<sup>1</sup> For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

<sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

<sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

<sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

- <sup>5</sup> a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
<sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.

All these times characterize human life. The Psalmist is saying that the particular configurations of all these times in my life are in the hands of a trustworthy, gracious God. That is not easy to say. In order to be able to say it, we need the instruction of this Psalm. We need to pray it often, and as we do, we have the promise of the Heavenly Father that we shall grow into the image of the One who can *par excellence* before God call himself “Thy Servant” (verse 16), for we shall be praying in the same Spirit.

#### Nugget

Prayer means turning to Reality, taking our part, however humble, tentative and half-understood, in the continual conversation, the communion, of our spirits with the eternal Spirit; the acknowledgement of our entire dependence, which is yet the partly free dependence of the child. For Prayer is really our whole life toward God: our longing for Him, our “incurable God-sickness,” as Barth called it, our whole drive towards him. It is the humble correspondence of the human spirit with the Sum of all Perfection, the Fountain of Life. No narrower definition than this is truly satisfactory, or covers all the ground. Here we are, small half-real creatures of sense and spirit, haunted by the sense of a Perfection ever calling to us, and yet ourselves so fundamentally imperfect, so hopelessly involved in an imperfect world... This longing, this need of God, however dimly and vaguely we feel it, is the seed from which grows the strong, beautiful and fruitful plant of prayer. It is the first response of our deepest selves to the attraction of the Perfect; the recognition that He has made us for himself, that we depend on him and are meant to depend on him, and that we shall not know the meaning of peace until our communion with him is at the center of our lives.

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