

[by Julian]

### Introduction

Imagine a Christian friend who is prominent in public life – perhaps an MP. She is under massive attack for standing up for Christian values – a media storm is thrashing all around her. It is even affecting her family. Horrible things are being written about her on social media; fellow MPs from their own party are dissociating themselves from her. Commentators are writing her off not just as a failure but as an evil and dangerous person. It is affecting her mental and physical health – she has no energy, she feels miserable all the time; her body aches with psychosomatic pain. She feels unsafe when she leaves the house, let alone when she looks at the new media. It feels as though she is under siege. To her, everything she had tried to be – a person of integrity serving others in public and private life – is being thoroughly trashed. What does she say to God?

That is a likely modern version of where David found himself in Psalm 31.

### Structure

The overall structure of the Psalm is two main parts.

**vv1-18 Need and Trust**

**vv19-24 Praise and Exhortation**

In part one (1-18) we see a repeated pattern of the cry for help and the movement of trust into God's help. In Part Two (19-24) we find praise to God and a call for others to make that same movement of trust.

As we break down part 1 we see this repeated pattern in more detail:

#### *Prayer for safety (1-5)*

v.1 – 4 The need for a safe place

v. 5 Commitment into God's hands

#### *Statement of confidence (6-8)*

v.6 Trusting God not idols

v.7-8 God's past help gives hope for the future

#### *Plea for help because of dire situation (9-13)*

v.9 Help needed because soul and body are weak

v.10 His whole life seems to be in painful decline

v.11 His reputation has nose-dived among enemies and friends

v.12 He's being put on the scrap heap

v.13 He's surrounded with well-grounded fears

#### *Statement of trust and anticipation of deliverance (14-18)*

v.14 He entrusts himself to God

- v.15 He recognises all his experiences are in God's hands and pleads for deliverance from his enemies
- v.16 He pleads for the felt sense of God's presence
- v.17-18 He pleads for public vindication instead of the current public shaming

In Part Two (vv19-24 Praise and Exhortation) we see something of a shift – towards confident praise and a generalisation of his experience of the safety God gives as something open to anyone who will ask him.

- vv. 19-20 Proclamation of God's abundant goodness and the safety God gives those who trust in him
- vv21-22 Call to praise Him because he saves us even when we feel we are cut off from him.
- vv.23-24 Invitation and Exhortation to anyone who will, to love God and find safety in Him.

**Suggestions for study (these are necessarily a bit subjective and selective as it is quite a long dense Psalm)**

*Repeated words:* it is worth going through the Psalm and noticing how certain ideas, words or phrases are repeated – eg “hands”, “refuge/rescue”, “deliver/redeem”.

*Graphic images:* read vv.1-4 and notice how many different pictures David uses for his feeling of insecurity and what he feels he needs. What does this poetic piling up of image upon image portray?

*Notice how low God allows him to become* – eg in descriptions of close-to-total personal breakdown: read vv10-13. Notice the psychosomatic effect on his body and his inner morale. And realise all this comes from vicious, reputation-destroying words.

*Notice the floating backward and forward* from knowing that God is a safe place and wanting to feel safe: eg 1, 3, 4, 15, and in his panicky sense of being cut off from God (22).

*Distinct movements of faith:* read v.5 and v.14. These are crucial moments. Notice what happens inside David in each one.

*Look at the expressions of confidence:* v. 15 is particularly worth attention. Look back at v. 5 and v.8 and tie them together with the question “whose hands is my life in?”

*Notice his strong feelings about his opponents:* v. 6 and vv.17-18. Are these morally reprehensible or is there a reason for them, in context, given that they are slandering God's servant?

Now try to put together a short prayer for the politician in our introduction to use in her particular predicament.

My quick attempt at this looks something like this:

Lord, I feel totally humiliated and it's killing me and my family. Lord, I need a safe place: you are a safe place. Lord, I am just going to entrust myself to you. Thank you Lord that you have come through for me before: I believe I am safe and you have everything in your hands and you will vindicate me. Amen.

Of course I have left lots of things out! But I have tried to include the main features.

Now let's zoom out in two ways.

**First**, a couple of questions 1. Does the Psalm show that David got to a place where he was vindicated and 2. That it means he expects he will always be vindicated?

My answers would be to 1. that while David clearly has been rescued in the past (eg 7-8), I am not sure he gets to that point by the end of the Psalm. There is no unequivocal statement that he gets there, though you could choose to see v.22 that way. What the Psalm seems to show is a movement of personal trust so that he feels safe in God even though the problem has not gone away.

And to 2. That he does seem to expect eventual vindication in this life.

If this pair of answers is correct then it suggests that we should concentrate on a movement to feeling safe – while expecting eventual vindication (and freedom from attack).

Second – let's look at the NT use of v.5 "into your hands I commit my spirit." There are *two*

1. It was spoken by Jesus on the cross – Luke 23:46 – just before he dies.
2. Stephen speaks a version of these words but addressed to Jesus as *he* dies in Acts 7:59.

The common factor is that they are both about to die! This seems rather different from David's use of the prayer!

How does this affect our reading of the Psalm? My suggestions

1. Jesus was in a position of total public humiliation and shame. The cross was the highest place of shame for a Jew. He had people slandering him and his friends had deserted him. So his choice of Psalm 31 is presumably because of a high degree of overlap.
2. At the moment of apparent defeat (death) he makes a movement of trust in which he entrusts himself to God, in confidence that he would be safe and would be vindicated.
3. God kept him safe, not from death but through death. God did deliver him, not from death but from the lasting effect of death (including its shame). His vindication – through the resurrection immediately and through his triumphant return eventually.

Where does that leave us?

Now we turn to Stephen,

1. Again facing verbal and physical violence and on the point of death.
2. He has a vision of And he adapts the same prayer, addressing it to Jesus!
3. The note of confidence is there again.
4. But he dies, physically, and there is no immediate vindication (see Acts 8:1-3).

What do we take from this for our own appropriation of Psalm 31 and our use of it so that we have real not unreal expectations?

My suggestions:

1. We may face horrendous experiences, including public laceration and damaging attacks on our reputations.
2. All the while we are safe. But we feel far from unsafe.
3. God will eventually vindicate us but that may not happen in this life.
4. However, in this life, we can feel more safe by entrusting ourselves to him in repeated conscious acts like those of v5. And we can be utterly sure that he will eventually vindicate us totally and we will be in a position of total honour not shame.
5. This is not because of us, but because of Jesus and because He died for us.

So....

1. We can take the prayers of Psalm 31 into our own times of pressure and desperation, particularly when we are crushed by what people are saying about us.
2. We can find echoes of our experiences that give us words to say to Christ: these are particularly poignant because he has had the same experiences and felt the same things.
3. And we make the same chosen movement of faith committing ourselves into his hands. This is a deliberate choice, not an automatic thing.
4. It will tend to lead to us feeling more safe:
5. This experience will change and we will almost certainly feel we have to repeat that act and movement of self-entrusting to Christ
6. Whatever the variableness of our feelings and external experiences in this life, we can be sure one day, either in this life in a partial or temporary way (because troubles are never ending in this life) or in the new creation – totally and permanently, we will be vindicated and healed.

Suggestions:

1. Talk about times when we feel unsafe: how much is that because of what people say or think of us (or what we think they are thinking and saying!!)
2. Think and talk about the movement of faith of verse 5. How can we make that move?
3. Read (or sing) the words of a hymn based on verse 15:

1 My times are in thy hand;  
my God, I wish them there;  
my life, my friends, my soul, I leave  
entirely to thy care.

2 My times are in thy hand,  
whatever they may be;  
pleasing or painful, dark or bright,  
as best may seem to thee.

3 My times are in thy hand;  
why should I doubt or fear?  
My Father's hand will never cause  
his child a needless tear.

4 My times are in thy hand,  
Jesus the Crucified;  
those hands my cruel sins had pierced  
are now my guard and guide.

5 My times are in Thy hand;  
I'll always trust to Thee,  
Till I possess the promised crown,  
And all Thy glory see