

A Battle Strategy—Trust God

Psalm 31

Main point: God's hand of power, love, and goodness is sufficient to restore us to and enable us for useful service and praise.

INTRODUCTION:

Every song has a *theme* and *tone*. Every tune has a *movement* and a *message*. This psalm is no different, except that it is divinely inspired to teach us something about *God, ourselves, and life*. There are two movements in Psalm 31, which led John Goldingay to entitle this psalm, "*When a Prayer Needs to Be Prayed Twice*." The **first movement** is seen in verses 1-8, and a **second movement** is seen in verses 9-22, in which the basic elements parallel or match each other. Verse 5 and verse 15 are the two "anchor points" in both sections that keep our minds from *drifting into other seas of thought*, holding us tethered to the issue of *trust*.

- ⁵ Into Your hand I commit my spirit;
You have ransomed me, O LORD, God of truth.
- ¹⁵ My times are in Your hand;
Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and from those who persecute me.

The distinctive theme is *trust*. The tone is *lament* (*Remember, lament gives voice to the pain you feel but also anchors your heart to the truths you believe*), and the intriguing thing about this psalm is that Jesus Himself repeated verse 5 from the cross (*Cf. Luke 23:46*). David's was a prayer of *trust in life*; Jesus was a prayer of *trust through death and beyond it*—and when you connect these two things, you find that Psalm 31 is about entrusting yourself, your life, and your future to God.

WHEN...will you find that you need to trust God?

- When *persecution* and *pressure* mount. (v.4)
- When *affliction* and *trouble* come. (v.7)
- When *stress* rises and *failure* occurs. (vv.9-10)
- When *slander* pierces your heart and *opposition* arises. (vv.11-13)

WHAT...do you need to know that will aid you in trusting God?

False teachers will tell you *your life will be trouble-free, things will be smooth-sailing, and you will overcome every force* that comes against you. But this is not what this psalm reveals. **The bad news** is that the power of opposition against you and God's will for your life *will be real, and there is no escape*. If you are going to *mature*, you must *endure*, and if you are to be *saved*, you must *persevere*. **The good news** is that God's hand of power is greater and will ultimately prevail. The confidence which empowers you to *resist* and *endure* and invites you to turn your life over in trust to God is *God's hesed*—that is, His lovingkindness (vv.7, 16, 21).

Dear friends, it cannot be overstated. *God is committed in such a way to those who believe that we, in turn, can always commit ourselves to Him*. Because of *who God is*, we don't have to lash out at our enemies or fight back with carnal, ugly words, or sinful actions. **Our battle strategy** is drawn from the playbook of the Lord Jesus Himself. We can steadfastly resist by entrusting our life and future to God.

When we do, we are freed to *love* and *forgive*, grounded in the sure and steadfast confidence that we will be raised to life with Him.

EXPOSITION:

WHY...trust God in a world full of powerful forces that oppose God's will for your life? David sets three reasons before us in Psalm 31.

A. GOD'S HAND IS STRONGER (vv.1-5)

- In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge;
Let me never be ashamed;
In Your righteousness deliver me.
² Incline Your ear to me, rescue me quickly;
Be to me a rock of strength,
A stronghold to save me.
³ For You are my rock and my fortress;
For Your name's sake You will lead me and guide me.
⁴ You will pull me out of the net which they have secretly laid for me,
For You are my strength.
⁵ Into Your hand I commit my spirit;
You have ransomed me, O LORD, God of truth.

David's plea is three-fold: 1) **Lord, deliver me** (vv.1-2), i.e., "*deliver me,*" "*rescue me,*" "*save me.*" 2) **Lord, direct me** (v.3), "*You will lead me and guide me.*" And 3) **Lord, defend me** (vv.4-5). David's plea reveals the attitudinal shreds of evidence of saving faith. True believers are always calling upon the Lord to *save them from sin, direct them in life, and protect them from the enemy.*

David uses strong, endearing language in verse 2, "**Incline Your ear to me, rescue me quickly.**" Perhaps you've seen it before—a small child is sitting on her mother's lap while the mother is in conversation with a friend. After several attempts to gain the mother's attention, the child reaches out her little hands and grabs the cheeks of the mother and pulls the mother's face close to her own and says in a serious voice, "*Mommy, you're not listening to me!*" That's the feel of David's words in verse two. "Yahweh, I need your full and undivided attention to my desperate situation. I need action, Lord!"

But on what basis should we trust God to help us? The phrases "**in Your righteousness**" (v.1) and "**for Your name's sake**" (v.3) invite attention to the character of God. We say that character is essential in life, and someone has defined character as "what you are deep down inside when no one else is watching." But when we speak of God's character, we are describing *what God is*, which explains *how He works to give life to those who trust Him*.

- **Psalm 143:1**—Hear my prayer, O LORD,
Give ear to my supplications!
Answer me in Your faithfulness, in Your righteousness! (Cf. *Ps.89:1-2, 71:1-6*).

It is based on God's very being and character that we should trust Him. We trust in those with far less perfection. We trust our fathers or mothers, spouses or kids, or pastors, and yet, every person I just named, "*fall(s) short of the glory of God*" (*Rom.3:23*). But God cannot lie (*Tit.1:1-2*). He does not fail (*Jer.32:27*), He does not change (*Mal.3:6; Heb.13:8*), and He can perform what He promises (*Is.46:10*). His character is the sure foundation on which we *can* and *should* build our trust.

Here David shows us that because of *who God is*, God can be trusted to protect us and preserve us. A series of strong synonyms for “**refuge**” are strung together to solidify the point. He opens the psalm by speaking of the fact that he had “**taken refuge**” in the Lord, which means *to flee for protection*. In verse 2, David pleaded, “**Be to me a rock of strength,**” “**a stronghold,**” and in verse 3, “**my fortress,**” that is, *a house of fortification*. Given the military metaphor, we can safely assume that David is facing severe opposition. This repetition shows us the *intensity* with which the man of God is praying because He is trusting God as his *ultimate defense*.

What is his strategy? Verse 5 gives us an open secret.

- ⁵ Into Your hand I commit my spirit;
You have ransomed me, O LORD, God of truth.

The word “**hand**” connotes *power*, and it links verse 5 to verse 15, “*My times are in Your hand,*” or my future is in Your hand. Notice carefully now, “*the hand*” or power of God is contrasted with “*the hand of the enemy.*”

- **Verse 8**—And You have not given me over into the hand of the enemy;
You have set my feet in a large place.
- **Verse 15**—My times are in Your hand;
Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and from those who persecute me.

Application: the bad news is that if you trust God (if you follow Christ), the power of evil opposition will come against your life. The *flesh* will oppose you. The *devil* will oppose you. The *world* will oppose you. It is *real*. It is *relentless*. And it will affect *relationships* in your life. This is the *real, real*, true truth. But the good news is that *God’s hand is stronger*.

- **1 John 4:4**—because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.
- **1 John 5:4-5**—For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.
- **John 16:33**—These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

Is this your conviction? If so, then it will lead to *a commitment of entrusting yourself or turning your life and your future to God*. You can resist *giving in to the flesh*—how? By refusing to lash out and strike back—do what Jesus did.

- **1 Peter 2:21-23**—For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously;

B. GOD'S LOVE IS GREATER (vv.6-18)

The best way to approach Psalm 31 is to see it in light of Psalm 29 and 30. In Psalm 29, David poetically pictures God ordering *the thunderclouds over the sea* and *marching spectacularly down the country* (vv.3-4), causing havoc: snapping cedars, making the deer calve, stripping forests bare (vv.5-8). In the temple of His creation, there is only one word that is either shouting in *exultation* or whispering in *awe*, and it is the word, "Glory!" (v.9).

In Psalm 30, we see this God, again, *plucking a guilty man from the fire, pulling him back from the cliff of death* (v.3). He is one whose sovereignty is so detailed, yet He permits moral choices that result in moral consequences (vv.6-7). God is one who searches and knows the *hearts, motives, intentions*, and *outcomes* of every life, and if He so chooses, He can transform a night of weeping into a morning of joy (vv.5, 11).

Who is this God whose glory moves in the storm, yet whose eye pierces the soul of every sinner? Who is this God who disrupts our lives, enforces His moral order, and sits as the macro manager and micromanager of all there is? He is God!

Psalm 31 invites us to see Him again in these stark contrasts presented in Psalm 29-30. Verse 10 suggests that the setting of this psalm is possibly 2 Samuel 11 when David's sin weakened his inability to face up to the challenges of his life presented by his own family, and he sinned terribly with Bathsheba and her husband.

- ⁶I hate those who regard vain idols,
But I trust in the LORD.
⁷I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness,
Because You have seen my affliction;
You have known the troubles of my soul,
⁸And You have not given me over into the hand of the enemy;
You have set my feet in a large place.

If this is the case, then David shows us *how to look at God and speak to Him when we have failed* (vv.9-10).

- ⁹Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
My eye is wasted away from grief, my soul and my body *also*.
¹⁰For my life is spent with sorrow
And my years with sighing;
My strength has failed because of my iniquity,
And my body has wasted away.

He also shows us *what to do when we are suffering the consequences of our sin* (vv.11-13).

- ¹¹Because 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.
¹²I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind;
I am like a broken vessel.

The accusations of his enemies are taken seriously by his neighbors and friends, who shun him. He feels like "**broken pottery**," a familiar image for something *useful but now valueless* (Cf. Jer.2:13).

- ¹³ For I have heard the slander of many,
Terror is on every side;
While they took counsel together against me,
They schemed to take away my life.

So, *what do you do when you are persecuted, afflicted, distressed, isolated, and opposed?* The battle strategy does not change for David (vv.14-18).

- ¹⁴ But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD,
I say, "You are my God."
¹⁵ My times are in Your hand;
Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and from those who persecute me.
¹⁶ Make Your face to shine upon Your servant;
Save me in Your lovingkindness.
¹⁷ Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I call upon You;
Let the wicked be put to shame, let them be silent in Sheol.
¹⁸ Let the lying lips be mute,
Which speak arrogantly against the righteous
With pride and contempt.

Contrary to what one might expect a believer to do under these circumstances, true Christians don't quit. They don't fall apart. They keep entrusting themselves to *the hand of God* and the *love of God*.

Alec Motyer writes,

"The revelation of God in the Bible is full of contrasts, and one of our greatest mistakes (and temptations) is to try to reduce the number of such contrasts so as to bring the great God of Scripture within the confines of what our logic can manage."¹

In other words, we try to domesticate God. But a tame, manageable, weak God could not deal with the deep, dark, and difficult challenges we face. We need a *Savior, a Deliverer, a Sovereign* whose power is unimpeachable, yet whose love is so committed that it quite frankly...amazes wretches like us. This is the God we meet in the Psalms. His name is Yahweh.

When Jesus was on the cross, He was the "**object of dread**," (v.11) and "**horror**" and "**scorn**." There seemed to be no hope of rescue for Jesus. See Him there upon the tree. His body is broken like a smashed vessel (v.12). His eye wasted from grief. His strength fails, His bones show. Around Him, betrayal is in the air. It is so thick you can smell it. Enemies sneer and snicker, and neighbors flee in terror. The soundtrack for Jesus' death is *hissing* and *mockery*. No voice of comfort comes from the bystanders. But there on that cross, Jesus remembered and prayed this psalm, "*I trust in You, Father. You are My God. My times are in Your hands.*"

Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons take occasion with statements like this to deny the deity of Christ and the Trinity. They say, "If Jesus were God, He would not call God, His God...and; therefore, Jesus is someone less than God. He is the chief spokesman of God, the CEO of Jehovah, but not co-equal, co-eternal, and co-existent in power, glory, and authority."

When they do this, they reject all the clear passages and rules of grammar, which declare the Son's equality with God (*John 8:58; 10:30*). They turn away from the overwhelming body of New Testament evidence that *there is a work that the Father does in electing, predestining, and adopting* those who

¹ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, p.79

believe. *There is a work that the Son does in dying for and securing our redemption by His blood. And there is a work that the Spirit does in applying the benefits of Christ's work to us by convicting of sin, implanting saving faith, and sealing those who believe until the day of eternity (Eph.1:3-14).*

Why would you NOT trust a God whose love is greater than life? I will tell you why! Because sin has blinded your eyes, and unless Jesus opens them in the new birth, you will never see the kingdom or sniff heaven (*John 3:3ff*). You have *double blindness*; one is from *sin*, the other is from *Satan*, "*who has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*" (2 Cor.4:4).

But there is hope. The same God who spoke the world into existence can speak life into your soul.

- **2 Corinthians 4:6**—For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

C. GOD'S GOODNESS IS BETTER (vv.19-22)

- ¹⁹ How great is Your goodness,
Which You have stored up for those who fear You,
Which You have wrought for those who take refuge in You,
Before the sons of men!

David has been piling metaphor, upon metaphor, to paint the picture of *God's hand of power* and *God's heart of love*, and now he poetically draws up one more: *God's storehouse of goodness*. David shifts into the high gear of praise. Four kinds of **goodness** are set before us, which are designed to encourage trust in God.

The first two are in verse 19, and the second two are in verses 20 and 21. In verse 19, notice carefully that there is a goodness that is "**stored up**" as if it were in a warehouse with your name on it, but it is yet to be shipped. Then there is a goodness already dispensed or "**wrought**" for those who fear God.

Here David invites us to look back at God's goodness and to look forward to God's goodness.

1. Goodness already dispensed

Travel back in your thoughts over the many years and instances where God's goodness and favor filled your life. In Psalm 23:6, David said God's goodness is like two special agents that flank your life—"Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life." They are pictured as pursuing you and refusing to rest until they have tracked you down and provided safe harbor.

Think back to the desert of your past. It was summer. You were thirsty for purpose but had no clue where to find it. Then a table was spread out before you while in the wilderness of life. You were like the multitude who traveled with Jesus having heard of His wondrous works, but never tasting of His grace for yourself. Then, He made you sit down on the green grass, satisfied your hunger, and gave you life with plenty of leftovers to share with others. This is how the Word of God describes the goodness of God to bring salvation to us.

- **Titus 3:4-6**—But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, ⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.
- **1 Peter 2:1-3**—Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, ² like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, ³ if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

2. Goodness yet to come

As you *look forward*, David explains that the *goodness wrought or already dispensed* was only the fringes of what God has in store! All the gold in Fort Knox and all the currency in the U.S. Mint waiting to be put into circulation is nothing compared to the massive goodness that God has **"stored up"** for you! God's riches are not like the world's riches. After the world spends so much, they talk about deficits and debts. But God's goodness has no ceiling and no floor. It has no limits. God's goodness is inexhaustible.

Who is this goodness in store for? Let us pay close attention to the condition—"*for those who fear You...for those who take refuge in You.*"

Another contrast is given in verse 20, which shows us...

3. Goodness secretly bestowed (v.20)

- ²⁰ You hide them in the secret place of Your presence from the conspiracies of man; You keep them secretly in a shelter from the strife of tongues.

There is a goodness not seen by men but is enjoyed and possessed by those who walk in communion with God. The psalmist said in Psalm 16:11, "*In Your presence is fullness of joy,*" and in Psalm 21:6, "*For You make him most blessed forever; You make him joyful with gladness in Your presence.*"

When we walk with God in humble submission and quiet devotion, the spiritual blessings of a *peaceful mind*, *strength for work*, and *inner joy* are experienced in the secret place of His presence. Deep down in our hearts, joy is experienced that the world cannot take away because it is the joy of His indwelling presence (*John 16:22*).

- God's goodness already dispensed
- God's goodness yet to come
- God's goodness secretly bestowed

4. Goodness publicly given (vv.21-22)

- ²¹ Blessed be the LORD,
For He has made marvelous His lovingkindness to me in a besieged city.
²² As for me, I said in my alarm,
"I am cut off from before Your eyes";
Nevertheless You heard the voice of my supplications
When I cried to You.

Because David has *humbled* himself before God, *his lament blossoms into praise*. Here we see that God also makes His loyal love open and plain before others right amid their circumstances. Surrounded by his enemies, as if in a besieged city, those around David falsely accused him, and his friends entertained distorted perceptions. David even felt “cut-off” from God. He felt like he was too far gone.

And this is where some of you may be. But there is one word that makes all the difference—*“Nevertheless.”* Although people were mistaken and his own feelings said one thing, God had the final word. Does this not give us hope? This does not mean that all the consequences dissolved into thin air, but rather, David now can lift his head in confidence because God has given him some assurance that He has heard him. In the most surprising, unexpected way, God marvelously shows Himself strong, which is almost impossible to believe!

In closing, David calls the saints to join him and counsels them.

WHAT...are we to do David?

- ²³ O love the LORD, all you His godly ones!
The LORD preserves the faithful
And fully recompenses the proud doer.

RETURN LOVE TO GOD. God has loved you and still demonstrates His love for you, now give it back to Him. Love Him with all your heart. Love Him with all your soul. Love Him with all your mind. Love Him with all your strength.

I love the Lord, for He heard my voice,
He heard my cry, for mercy.
I love the Lord, because He turned His ear to me,
I will call on Him as long as I live.

The Lord is gracious and righteous,
Our God is full of compassion.
The Lord protects the brokenhearted,
He has become my salvation.²

Be strong in the Lord—**MAINTAIN CONFIDENCE IN GOD.**

- ²⁴ Be strong and let your heart take courage,
All you who hope in the LORD.

CONCLUSION:

Whether you are facing one crisis or experiencing a continued history of trouble, what would the Lord have you take away from this psalm?

He was a respected and successful Christian with an international reputation. He was well-liked at work, in the community, and among his friends. He was “moving up” into areas of authority and responsibility. But when his private moral demons become public, it became devastatingly painful for his wife, children, family,

² Maranatha Music, *I Love the Lord*

and friends. As new revelations became known day after day, and the circle of awareness grew, a lifetime of defense mechanisms began to fail—denial, excuses, anger, minimizing, rationalizing, compartmentalizing.

In private, he huddled in a near fetal position in the grips of an almost uncontrollable tremor and shake. In public, by some incredible exercise of will over body, he was able to master the tremor and appear almost normal, except perhaps, to a careful observer. Inside his hollow eyes, his mind was consumed with a single thought: maybe a high-speed car collision would relieve my wife, family, and, most importantly, my own heart from the public and private shame.

In moments like these, our perception of our circumstances seems to say there is no way out, and all is hopeless. Perhaps you are like David or the man I just described, and your world has collapsed. Your friends or family have given you the cold shoulder of disapproval. David knew what it was to be ridiculed, to be disgraced, and to feel like he was beyond the care of God. Alone and helpless.

In what appeared to be a hopeless circumstance, God arrived, if you will, to provide a refuge and hope. How do you find hope, help, and healing?

- **Cling to the God of truth** (v.5). Our interpretation of our context can be dangerously wrong. We need to see ourselves and our circumstances through the eyes of **"the God of truth."** He looks beyond the external superficial props to who we really are, and He has provided what we really need—in Jesus.
- **Commit your spirit and your life into the hands of the Lord.** Your flesh will drive you to try to take control and find your way out of the mess or misery you're in, but God is the only refuge you can genuinely trust. The last words of Jesus were in the words of this psalm—*"In Your hand, I commit my spirit"* (Luke 23:46). With these words, Jesus did not slip down off the cross to avoid death. He stepped right into it for our sins, but in doing so, He placed His soul in the hands of His Father—who raised Him from the grave; and He will raise you if you trust Him.

Will you cling to the God of truth today?

Will you commit your life into the hands of a Savior who won the battle and lives to save?

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