

Worship Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Psalm 31

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Two weeks ago now we began this brief series on worship, which was and is an extension that began with a Sunday evening reflection at a Lord's Supper service a couple of months ago as I was reflecting on the nature of worship. And I had many requests when I considered doing a longer series on it. And so two weeks ago we began talking about, what is worship at its basis? And worship at its basis is the acknowledgment and enjoyment of the Lord, to give him praise.

However, I recognize that when I define worship in that way, we often—particularly those who confess Christ in the western world—tend to reduce worship and enjoyment of God to songs of praise and joy. By joy, we mean expressions of smiling faces, enjoyment, and, indeed, happiness. It's easy to do that. However, any glance at the psalms will teach us that worship, while at its base is the enjoyment and praise of God—it is not, nor ever will be, reduced to smiling faces. Indeed, many of the psalms contain very few smiling faces. They include deep and abiding, unrelenting anguish. So the question would be, what does it mean to worship between a rock and a hard place? What can David teach us from Psalm 31? Because if you have your Bibles, you will see, if you turn to Psalm 31, most of our translations include the inscription written by the hand of David as a song for the body that was Israel. So with that in mind, consider this psalm, Psalm 31.

In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.

Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.

Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.

Free me from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.

Into your hands I commit my spirit;
redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.

I hate those who cling to worthless idols;
I trust in the LORD.

I will be glad and rejoice in your love,
for you saw my affliction
and knew the anguish of my soul.

You have not handed me over to the enemy
but have set my feet in a spacious place.

Be merciful to me, O LORD,
for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and my body with grief.

My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,
and my bones grow weak.
Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors;
I am a dread to my friends—
those who see me on the street flee from me.
I am forgotten by them as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery.
For I hear the slander of many;
there is terror on every side;
they conspire against me
and plot to take my life.
But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."
My times are in your hands;
deliver me from my enemies
and from those who pursue me.
Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your unfailing love.
Let me not be put to shame, O LORD,
for I have cried out to you;
but let the wicked be put to shame
and lie silent in the grave.
Let their lying lips be silenced,
for with pride and contempt
they speak arrogantly against the righteous.
How great is your goodness,
which you have stored up for those who fear you,
which you bestow in the sight of men
on those who take refuge in you.
In the shelter of your presence
you hide them from the intrigues of men;
in your dwelling you keep them safe
from accusing tongues.
Praise be to the LORD,
for he showed his wonderful love to me
when I was in a besieged city.
In my alarm I said, "I am cut off from your sight!"
Yet you heard my cry for mercy
when I called to you for help.
Love the LORD, all his saints!
The LORD preserves the faithful,

but the proud he pays back in full.
Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the LORD.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Lord, help us to worship you between a rock and a hard place. Help us, O Lord, to be taught by your Word that being in trial and suffering and, indeed, anguish, is not something strange happening to us, but it is the way of the world. Your Word takes sin and brokenness seriously, and gives us the word of hope in the midst of it. Lord, will you enable us to take sin and brokenness seriously? That it would enable us to be a congregation that is an honest reflection of reality in this world that is full of brokenness, full of anguish. And yet, O Lord, the end of that story is not anguish but hope. Will you enable us to worship as the psalmist does, and enable us to see Jesus, who, indeed, is our Savior and our King? In his name we pray. Amen.

Were you to take my iTunes and look at the genres, you would see that the vast majority of my embarrassingly large library is the blues. From my earliest days, the record albums being played in my home were usually made up of a string of different people. Most notably, I remember my earliest learning how to dance was with my parents listening to BB King, whose song “How Blue Can You Get?” haunts me. Its live performance, perhaps the best I’ve ever seen, and has brought me to tears many times—because he sang it in the midst of a prison on thanksgiving. Or the tortured life and redemption of Stevie Ray Vaughan, who would once sing after a long bought of recovery from drug addiction, he would sing the song, “The Things That I Used to Do.” Or Otis Redding, “Old Man Trouble.” Ray Charles echoed through my home with his famous song “Hard Times.”

But there is no other voice that would describe my home and the music that I was raised on than all of those blues musicians found in one voice that is singing a song and singing songs themselves and voices that would become itself the blues. It is Aretha Franklin. And I’ve played no album more than Aretha Franklin’s life album—which I commend to you, if you are a Christian—I commend to you to at least go to Youtube and listen to it. It is the live performance with her and Doctor Reverend James Cleveland in Los Angeles at the First Temple Baptist Church. You can buy the entire, complete album—which I absolutely commend to everyone.

Those songs are a deep and abiding lesson of how to worship between a rock and a hard place. Two songs which have largely captured my heart in worship and prepared me for many Sundays of worship: “God Will Take Care of You” and “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” These are not songs that are generally a part of my tradition as a pastor, but they transcend every theological tradition, and they have taught me how to sing in anguish.

But I commend to you this psalm, because, like the blues, David, I think, was the original blues musician. And before him, Job, who would be able to look at their suffering and not count it strange, but count it something that is normative—particularly for those who find their strength in the Lord. You see, we are ensconced by a culture that wants to run from suffering at every possible corner and opportunity. Indeed, in our own state, the right to die law is largely going to, very soon, be before our state house, to doctor-assisted suicide. I pray that it does not pass, as I encourage you to pray for wisdom for our law-abiding, seeking-our-good representatives in Annapolis. Because a recent article gave word to, why is this becoming such an important thing, and why are the eyes of many turning to Maryland? Listen to what they found. When talking about assisted suicide—and trust me, this is not a tangent—work with me:

Assisted suicide advocates claim they merely want to help people avoid pain in their final days. But according to Oregon's public health department, the top reasons given for physician-assisted suicide in the state are loss of autonomy (91.4%), decreased ability to

engage in enjoyable activities (86.7%), loss of dignity (71.4%), loss of control of bodily functions (49.5%) and becoming a burden on others (40%). [USA Today]

If we were to take those reasons and wed them together with what those who say that doctor-assisted suicide is a good thing, that somehow we want to save people from pain—we need to understand, ladies and gentlemen in the church, if you profess Jesus as Lord, we are ensconced and marinated in a culture that looks at pain as something to absolutely avoid. And yet, if we think that the Christian church is immune from that reality, we are kidding ourselves. If we are honest, many of us look at suffering and pain and think it odd and hard, as if there's something wrong with us, as if God is mad at us. And it's hard for us to sing in anguish. It's because our world does, too.

How has this kind of culture affected the way that Christians praise the Lord? Some of you might think that it hasn't at all. But consider one theologian, Carl Trueman, who stood before three very different audiences when he asked the following questions: "What do miserable Christians sing?" And every time he asked that, he was met with uproarious laughter. And he said, "Why is that?" He suggests, could it be a diet of unremittingly jolly choruses and hymns, inevitably creating an unrealistic horizon of expectation which sees the normative Christian life as one of a long, triumphalist street party? And he suggests this. He says:

If we were to take an honest portrait of Biblical believers, it would give no room to such a notion. If we look at Abraham, Joseph, David, Jeremiah, and many of the psalmists, we would hear much agony, much lamentation, and occasional despair, and joy will manifest itself. It is very different from the frothy triumphalism that has so infected much of our modern, western Christianity. In the psalms, God has given the church a language which allows it to express even deepest agonies of the human soul in the context of worship.

This is what brought me to Psalm 31. Let's look together briefly, as the Lord would prepare us to come to the table, which is only here because our Savior went through anguish for us. So what would David teach us, then, about worshipping the Lord in anguish? First, there's a prayer of deliverance—verses one through eight. And I would encourage you to ignore the verse numbers in your bulletins. That was my mistake. Anguish poured out is verses nine through thirteen. And then prophetic celebration, fourteen through twenty-four. So prayer for deliverance, anguish poured out, prophetic celebration.

Prayer for deliverance, verses one through eight. What David does, first and foremost, is he goes to God with his deepest concerns and he cries out to him, and he says two things. One, he declares that the Lord is his place of refuge. And then calls on the Lord to demonstrate that, indeed, he is the Lord of refuge, a rock upon which he stands. And so when he cries out, "Lord, I want to take my refuge in you," he says to him, "Deliver me," not in the righteousness of the singer, but in the righteousness of the Lord. So he calls on God as his deliverer, and claims him as his refuge, not based on anything that David brings to the table, but by everything that the Lord does—by his promise. So he says that the Lord is his refuge, and claims it, not because of David's adherence to the Lord, but because of the Lord's adherence to his promise. So he calls out to the Lord as his place of refuge, because the Lord has already announced his promise to David: "I will be your Lord, and you will be my people. I have made you a king for my people Israel." And he took David from a young man, feeble and weak, youngest among his brothers, and would make him king.

And when he calls on the Lord as his refuge, he then says, "Okay, I'm going to say it again. Yes, you're my place of refuge according to your righteousness," and then he comes back and he says, "Okay, so since you have been that for me in the past, according to your promises, I'm crying out to you again. Lord, deliver me." He says in verse four, "Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge." So in claiming the God of refuge because of the promise, he brings it right into the present, and he cries out again—"Lord, be my refuge, for there is a trap set before me."

What is that trap? Many scholars believe that David is writing this while he is fleeing Saul, the king of Israel, pursuing this one who would be the new, anointed king. And the Lord knows that Saul is pursuing David. David knows the trap that Saul has set for him—turning people against him. And yet David finds refuge only in the Lord. And he says this: “Into your hands I commit my spirit. Redeem me, O Lord, the God of refuge,” repeating again what was earlier written in Psalm 22, when he says, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” It is the summary of what he’s just said in this prayer for deliverance: “You are my refuge, because of your promise. I’m now calling on that promise again. Lord, be my refuge amidst the trap set before me.”

And then, in this prayer for deliverance, what does he do? It is the ultimate expression of all prayer. Instead of claiming autonomy, instead of looking at pain and anguish and trial as something strange, he simply says, “Lord, here I am. I give myself to you.” And while his circumstances may not change, only because of God’s promise of being a refuge, and only in crying out for God as refuge, do we see David then being able to say, “Because of your promise and because you are my strength, I can say, take my life.”

Do you know why we’re able to celebrate the Lord’s Supper? It’s because this is precisely what the Lord Jesus said from the cross at the hour that he gave up his life. He said, “Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit.” You see, what David says here, he says in seed form, which would become the greater David—Jesus. And to you this morning, as you claim faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, this supper is being celebrated because your Savior gave himself over to the God of refuge because of his promise, and would say, “Through this trial I must pass to redeem your people, though I am blameless in your sight. Into your hands I commit my spirit. Into your hands—your hands have delivered for me suffering and trial.”

Even though Jesus would say, just as the psalmist says here, “Take this cup from me,” David would say, “Save me from this trap.” And yet David still had to go through it, and that is pointing us to the greater David, Jesus, who would say, “Take this cup from my hand.” And he would pray that even to the point of sweating out blood in the midst of his prayer. And yet he knew that this was the Lord’s will for him. He could taste it, knowing that what he could taste was the Lord turning his back on him, and suffering to the point of utter anguish—which no one has suffered like Jesus has suffered. No one has truly committed their spirit into the hands of the Lord like our Savior has. And so, therefore, the Lord has already lead you in this prayer. He’s way out in front of you. He has suffered for you, and in that suffering, he has committed his spirit, which enables us to say, “If my Savior has done so, how much more, then, can I commit my spirit to the Lord amidst my suffering?”

And after this prayer for deliverance, David then turns honestly to the Lord, and he gives his anguish, and he pours it out in verses nine through thirteen. Consider, if you just take your fingers and go over those verses, you will see these things written there. After he’s already prayed a prayer of deliverance, he then turns with piercing honesty and great transparency and expresses deep sorrow, full-body weariness, deep groaning, profound weakness, defeat, rejection, loneliness, and threat. And he expresses these things. And even, he says, my neighbors, the people who know me, are not a refuge for me.

If we’re honest, Christian, when someone expresses to us deep loneliness and anguish and weakness, rejection, don’t we sometimes feel that what they need to be met with is, “Well, at least... at least you have the Lord.” These are things we’re so tempted to say, because, when we’re honest, we’re speechless before our own anguish. And when others are honest enough to express it to us, don’t we feel helpless? Doesn’t it feel just instinctual that we feel we need to fill that space with something to try to make it better? I do. Because I’m the pastor. I’m supposed to have something to say. I feel that pressure. Surely, you must. And I haven’t always responded well. Do you know why? Because when I’m honest, sometimes my anguish takes my breath away, and I don’t know what to say. And so sometimes I don’t know what to say to you, either, because sometimes what comes up from my heart and what I hear sometimes coming up from your heart scares me—because it’s so honest. It’s so raw.

And yet, when I read this psalm, I find it incredibly real. I find it surprisingly freeing. If we can just be honest that this life and this world is desperately broken and so am I—and when we're honest, most of the time, looking around us and looking in the mirror, life just stinks. And that perhaps the word I can use in polite company. This is important for us to hear, because, remember, this was a song of worship. He's singing this, because he's teaching us that in worship, it is the best place to cry out in anguish and brokenness and weariness and sadness. It is the safest place.

Consider the words, again, Aretha Franklin, singing, "God Will Take Care of You." She says:

Be not dismayed, whatever betide you
You need to know, God will take care of you
Beneath his wings of love abide you
You need to know, God will take care of you
Through days of toil, when heart dost fail
When dangers fierce your path assail
You better remember, God will take care of you
No matter what may be the test, lean, weary one, safe in my rest
And you just remember that you know
God will take care of you

The song ends by saying:

Through your trials and through your storms
When it seems you can't hold on
Trouble is on every side
Cried so much you can't cry no more
They can talk about you, laugh about you, say it's over
But it's not over until God says it's over
Remember that he is always faithful
You serve a God who is able to take care of you

And in the performance of that song, it goes as a slow ballad. And then, with three minutes and fifty seconds yet to go, the song ends. And if you listen to it in its entirety, you think that there's something wrong with your media player. And then, Doctor Reverend James Cleveland steps to the microphone, and he says to the sanctified church, "What do you say?" And then, slowly, very slowly, there begins to build the end of the song. The beat completely changes. And then over and over and over again, with increasing rapturous cry, "God will take care of you."

And just as Aretha sang, just as that church sang, so does David. Because he goes from anguish poured out to prophetic celebration. What flows from verses fourteen to twenty-four—the verb tenses change. It becomes a prophetic celebration, looking into the future. Though his circumstances have not changed, he begins to worship and cry out in the midst of his anguish. After he has cried out and proclaimed and poured out his anguish, he then turns and gives the Lord three petitions. Verses fifteen to seventeen, it tells us, he says, "Deliver me. Let your face shine upon me. And let me not be put to shame." He's saying, "Do this, O Lord," but he saying it in the verb tense of, "This will happen. You will do this. God will take care of me." Not only is he taking care in the midst of my anguish, he will take care of me. And so he says, "Deliver me. Let your face shine upon me. Let me not be put to shame."

And then he weds those petitions with future hopes when he says, "Defeat my enemies. May they go to utter defeat." And then he says, "Silence their lips." He says, "Will you do this?" And in that cry, he gives a prophetic celebration, because the God whose promise enables him to cry out for refuge, the God whose grace is in the midst with him where he can cry out, and God is not embarrassed, God is not ashamed of the psalmist crying out in anguish. So now he turns and he says, "Will you, O Lord, do these things?"

And then, in verses nineteen through twenty-four, he gives these declarations of praise—petitions, hopes, and praises. And he praises God. Do you see it? He praises him for his faithful goodness, for his redemption, for his protection—indeed, for the Lord’s resurrection. When he says of the Lord here, “How great is your goodness.” Do you know he’s saying that though his circumstances haven’t changed? And he says, “You will be my redemption. You will protect me. You are the shelter for my presence. You are the shelter of my presence in your presence.” And he says, “Will you, O Lord, redeem me?” Indeed, he says, “You have shown me your wonderful love.” He says, “Though I was in a besieged city, I said in my alarm, ‘I am cut off from your sight.’ Yet you heard my cry for mercy. When I called out to you for help.”

So he’s recalling, “I called out to you from a completely besieged city. And yet the Lord answered him. And then he finishes, “Love the Lord, all his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful.” He’s talking about resurrection. He’s talking about how the Lord takes the blues and turns them into gospel. But it is not the denial of suffering. The gospel takes seriously the problem of sin and brokenness. And the Lord Jesus, when he came as the greater David, looked sin in the eye, looked evil in the eye, and he took it all on himself. And then to the Lord his Father he turned, and when he said, “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” what did he do? He turned not only to face the evil that the world was throwing at him—and he says, “Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do”—he also looked to the Father, and he says, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” What was he doing? He was turning and saying, “Lord, pour out your wrath, but not upon them—upon me.”

Your Savior cried out in anguish, and he worshipped. And because Jesus went before us, because of our sin, and took on our sin and worshipped in the midst of his anguish, receiving the wrath of God, on the third day he rose again. And the blues became the gospel. And he set a table for us. The bread of heaven and the blood of Calvary set before us as a meal of celebration, echoing not that this table is set in the midst of goodness—echoing the psalmist. “You have set a table before my enemies.”

This table is set in the midst of your sin. If you are a sinner who finds salvation in the Lord, redeemed by him, this table is a table of sinners—a table set before sin itself and the enemy, who is Satan—a table set for your redemption, to point us to the bread of heaven and the blood of Calvary. Because in the midst of anguish, your debt was paid, and it was turned into dancing and rejoicing on the third day that he rose again. And only with the anguish of Calvary and the glorious resurrection on that Sunday morning are we able to come to him in our anguish and worship the Lord between a rock and a hard place. And if that is where you find yourself this morning, the Lord has set a table for you. And the bread of heaven and the blood of Calvary is here to give you grace, for the Lord is your refuge. He is your Redeemer. He is the Lord. Let’s pray.

Now, Lord, come. As we commit ourselves to you, we ask that you would meet us in the midst of our anguish, our sorrow, our brokenness. Meet us, Lord, in the midst of our need for forgiveness and sin, and the consequences of a world broken by sin. You did not turn your eyes away, but rather took on flesh and made your dwelling known among us, full of grace and truth. Would you make your dwelling known among us this morning in your grace and truth? And now, will you feed us the supper that points us to Jesus, who enables us to worship you between our rock and hard place? Now, give us grace. In Jesus’ name. Amen.