

Psalm 31:6-24

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[0 : 00] And we dealt with the first eight verses last week and we're going to do the rest of the psalm. Today I was at Grace Coventry, Grace Church IPC Coventry at the church plant this morning.

It was a really encouraging time and give thanks to Peter and Libby Leach. They've had their third little baby, James. So he was there and it was a really, really encouraging time.

They're small in number. I was about 13 there this morning, but it's really encouraging to see them get established. You look at a church plant like that and you think, well, it takes courage, doesn't it, of Peter and Libby Leach to move to Coventry, to begin a church really just with their family, to be a Christian in a place where you don't know anyone.

It takes courage to stand, to be a Christian in school, doesn't it, children? It takes courage. And we know, don't we, particularly the times that we live in, I'm called for courage.

It's always the case that the people of God need courage. We need courage to stand against our own sin and we need courage to stand against the sin of others as they face us.

[1 : 11] And if you're anything like me, you find that it's easier to melt and stand firm. Easier to leak than hold it together, than to persevere.

Last week we looked at the first eight verses of this psalm at the start of the year. And it reminded us that there's a glorious phrase in this passage which Jesus quotes on the cross.

And the phrase shows us that not only are we to prepare for our dying, but we're to use this phrase in our living. The cry is, into your hands I commit my spirit.

And it's not only the cry of the martyrs, but it is the cry of the living. We are to live this year by committing our spirit into God's hands. And he gives us further encouragement to do that tonight.

There are other pressures out there to discourage us. And cause us to be sorrowful. Let's see them in verses 9 to 10. He talks about one of the problems that he faces.

[2 : 14] And he describes it in detail. And then in verses 11 to 13 he sets out another. And then from that point on, the psalmist piles on these exhortations about God himself.

The times call for courage. And so what hinders us from being courageous? Two things. First of all, do you see he mentions the word because, look at verse 9.

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I'm in distress. And my eye is wasted from grief. My soul and my body also for my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing.

My strength fails because, because of my iniquity. My iniquity. My iniquity. Sometimes the thing that saps us of courage.

Sometimes the thing that pulls up to the surface all our fears is our own sin. Not what someone else might be saying, that's point number two. Not what someone else might be doing, that's point number two.

[3 : 20] The first thing he acknowledges here is that when he finds himself in great distress, with his eye wasting away from grief, his soul and his body wasting away from grief, his life being spent with sorrow, his years with sighing, what's the problem?

Why is it that you're weeping so much? Why is it you've been crying so intensely? What is it that makes you feel your body is like a lead weight? You want to rise up and praise God, but all you can do is weep and cry and sigh.

It's your sin. It's your iniquity. One of the things that can be most destructive in our Christian walk with God, one of the things that can be most debilitating in living the Christian life, is when we remember our own sin.

We have different ways of reacting to our own sin, don't we? Sometimes we belittle it. It's nothing, it's all forgiven, it's covered in the blood.

Well, yes it is. But do we not feel grief over it? Repent of it and turn from it and hate it? We become so engrossed in our sin that we can't see anything.

[4 : 39] It has this blinding, numbing effect upon us so that we don't feel it anymore. And I think that is what is happening to the psalmist.

His discouragement is partly stated firstly because of his own sin. When we think of the Lord Jesus praying Psalm 31.

The Lord Jesus would never have known this. The Lord Jesus is sinless. He doesn't have a past. He is holy. And when we hear him crying, into your hands I commit my spirit.

We know that he has no grief over his own sin. He had no sins in his sorrows. You know, I've often wondered at the moment in time when the Father laid our sin upon him.

And the Lord Jesus is made to be sin who knew no sin. What did that feel like? What weight did that put upon Jesus' soul?

[5 : 46] The weight of our iniquity being laid upon the Lord Jesus. And so there is a sense, isn't there, where he could have said these words because of my iniquity.

Not his own. As he owns his people's sin and as he experiences the full weight of it. The Lord knows what it is to have eyes wasted with grief.

To have his soul and his body in agony. His life spent with sorrow. His years with sighing. His strength failing. His bones wasting away. Because the iniquity of us all is laid on him.

He knows this in a particular sense. We know it, don't we, in a soul-crushing sense that can just stop us in our tracks. And so what happens to you when you are reminded of your sin?

Or, like what it is for many of us, we're reminded of some sin that we committed in the past. And the sins and faults of our youth just keep coming back and they keep rearing their ugly head.

[6 : 59] You're going about your normal business. And you're overtaken with a sense of shame when you remember what you've done. Do you just shrug it off?

Or does it cripple you? And both of those extremes are to be avoided. When our sin comes before us in that way, we're not just to shrug it off.

But we're not also to allow it to disable us. So that we can't think or move. You're going to get fed up with this.

But there's a wonderful scene in Pilgrim's Progress. Christine is making his way heavenward. He's left the city of destruction behind. He's left the wickedness behind.

He's running to the cross. The burden of sin has... He's running to the celestial city. The burden of his sin has rolled away. But there's a certain point where he's making his way to House Beautiful.

[8 : 00] House Beautiful is a picture of fellowship. It's the church. And he's making his way to it. And on his way, he's met with two guys running as fast as they can in the opposite direction.

And their names are Timorous and Mistrust. To be Timorous is to be faithful. To be mistrustful is not to be sure what's going on.

And not sure why God is working in this way. And they tell Christine, they say, do not keep going. Don't keep heading in that direction. Because there are lions outside House Beautiful.

Christine thinks to himself, what am I going to do? He says to Mistrust and Timorous, he says, at any rate I must venture. Whatever you may do, I must venture.

Even if the lions you speak of should tear me to pieces. I, for one, will never go back. To go back is nothing but death. To go forward is fear of death and everlasting life beyond.

[9 : 03] So I will go forward. Timorous and Mistrust, they run down the hill. And Christine went on his way. It's a really helpful picture. To show us that sometimes we can be afraid, can't we, of the lions that lie in the way.

Alexander White was a famous free judge of Scotland minister in the 19th century. He preached a series of sermons on Pilgrim's Progress. And he's got a chapter on it, on Timorous and Mistrust. Here's what he says. Now who or what is the lion in your way? Who or what is it that fills you with such timorousness and mistrust?

That you are almost churning back from the way of life altogether? The fiercest of all our lions is our own sin. When a man's own sin not only finds him out but comes roaring after him.

But when it dashes past him and gets into the woods and the thickets before him. And starts pouring and foaming on the side of his way. That is a trial of faith and love and trust indeed.

Sometimes a man's past sins will fill all his future.

[10:13] Sometimes a man's sins will fill all his future life with sleepless apprehensions. He's never sure at what turn in his upward way he may not suddenly run up against some of them.

Standing ready to rush out upon him. And I think Alexander White pictures perfectly what's going on in Psalm 31. My eyes wasted from grief, my soul and body also.

My life is spent with sorrow, my years with sin, my strength fails because of my iniquity. And he's not simply saying because of my iniquity in the past. But it's like a lion that's gone out ahead of him now.

And he's never quite sure when his sin is going to come roaring out of the thicket of life. And pouring at him and gnashing its teeth at him. It's one thing to be discouraged in your soul because you remember your sin.

But it's another thing to anticipate it again coming face to face with it in the future. And we must remember tonight that we are brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[11:21] You must remember that you are precious saints belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ. Bought with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you must remember that in Bunyan's picture when Christine was going forward and he gets to the house he sees the lions.

It's a brilliant picture. He sees the lions. They're massive. And he's terrified. And out of House Beautiful comes Mr. Watchful. He's a pastor.

And Mr. Watchful comes out and he shouts, It's okay. It's alright. The lions are... Chained. Chained. They're tied up.

And Christine is able to walk up the middle. To House Beautiful. Could you even think of doing that in real life? Wouldn't it be terrifying? You'd be so scared.

Your sin is going to roar at you. Your sin is going to swipe out its paws at you this week. Your sin is going to bare its teeth against you. It will grieve you. But you can walk through the middle.

[12:30] Only by the grace of God. And it's by the grace of God that this week you will be able to walk on the path. There's always room for us to weep over our sin.

And there's always room for us to be grieved over our sin. But don't stop moving forward. Trusting in God. Looking to the Lord Jesus Christ. Do not.

Do not go back. Know that the way back is the way of death. The way forward may be a fear of death.

But it is still the way to everlasting life. Are you grieved by your own sin? Well let's look at the other thing that grieves him. First in verse 10.

He's grieved and he is fearful because of his sin. And iniquity. But the second is in verses 11 to 13. Because of all my adversaries.

[13:28] I become a reproach. Especially to my neighbours. And an object of dread to my acquaintances. Those who see me in the street. Flee from me. Be forgotten like one who's dead.

I become like a broken vessel. 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's giving us a second reason for the discouragement.

And the reason why he found himself walking with kind of lead in his feet. In the Christian life. It's not just because of his own sin. But it's because of the stuff that's happening around him.

It's one thing to be distressed because you're wrestling with your own sin. But it's another thing to be distressed. It's because you're being pushed about by other people. Pushed about because people know that you trust God.

They know that you fear God. People know that you have a conscience. And it's awake. And it smites you. And there are layers to this opposition.

[14:25] Can you see? First of all he talks about enemies or adversaries. About those who are opposed to him. And then in the next phrase in verse 11.

He talks about his neighbours. And then in the next phrase he talks about his acquaintances. Which I'm not really sure why they've translated the word that. The word that means people who know you.

It's know. It can also mean friends. And so here it is. There are layers to the way that he thinks about the people who are dealing with him.

Layer number one are the people that just don't like him. They're his opponents. And they're the people who are out to get him. There are people out there that don't like us. People begin to avoid you.

Has that ever happened to you? You've been in a shop. And you see people you know. And then you see them trying to avoid you.

[15:23] Has that ever happened to you? It's happened to me. They may be just avoiding you because they're busy or something. Or there may be another reason why they're avoiding you.

Have you ever had someone cross the road to avoid talking to you? You've had people who knew pretend not to see you.

Verse 12 he talks about being forgotten. Left aside. Left out. And he's not being kind of the last pick at school. Or the person who's always putting goals in school. He's talking about being left out like you're dead.

Nobody calls you. Nobody talks of you. Nobody thinks of you. Nobody is really interested in what's happening in your life. That's discouraging, isn't it? That's really discouraging. That's painful. Verse 11. Because of all my adversaries, I've become a reproach.

Especially to my neighbours. And an object of dread to my acquaintances. To my friends. To those who know me. Those who see me in the street. They flee from me. I've been forgotten like one who's dead. They've not only forgotten your phone number.

[16:29] But they thought you were dead. They don't ring. They don't call. They don't write. They don't look out for you. They don't greet you. And then it goes further. Verse 13. There's a whispering campaign. People scheming against him.

Plotting to take his life. It's so painful. So discouraging. And it can be, can't it? It's paralyzing. The fear of other people. And what's happening, I think, is on two levels.

First of all, there's a war of words, aren't there? Things are said. I hope that none of the parents here say, sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me. Because we know, don't we, that that just isn't true.

Things which are said to you, aren't they, children? They're really painful. And when things are said about you behind your back and you find out about them, they're even more painful.

And then the war of words goes silent. Because the next layer of it is the relationship starts to fracture. There's a warm relationship, a living relationship, but it cools.

[17:40] And then ice comes. Ice starts to creep over the relationship. And a hardness comes in and the relationship becomes brittle. And easily broken when it's frozen over.

It's not a living, joyful, breathing, beating kind of relationship and friendship. It's a fracturing and splitting apart, a twisting. And winter has set in your relationships.

And there's nothing you can do to stop it happening. And that's why it's so distressing when that happens. That's why I think he's crying out here. He's saying, what is happening, Lord?

Why is it that I've become a reproach to my adversaries, and especially my neighbours, why am I an object of dread to my acquaintances? Those who see me in the street, they flee from me.

Why have I been forgotten? The war of words freezes into fracturing relationships. Just stop and pause for a moment.

[18:42] The first point is we can be discouraged by our own sin. The second point is we can be discouraged when we realise that other people are sinners too. Why is that so surprising to us?

Especially if we know the first one. Why does the second one hurt so much? Especially if I know myself a sinner.

Why is it such a shock to discover that there are a few other sinners around? Why is it such a shock to discover that I'm married to a sinner? And that our children are sinners?

And that our parents are sinners? And believe it or not, that your grandchildren are sinners? Why does it shock us?

And I think that's a struggle. It's just so discouraging. He's living in a sinful world. I myself am a sinner. And everyone around me is a sinner. And all the relationships we have from the furthest away to the closest relationships have sin in it.

[19:53] And sin is damaging and discouraging and so overwhelming. Well, that's closing prayer. We can't end there, is it? Sorry, it's depressing.

So what is the remedy? What does the psalmist do? How is he going to lift you up out of this tonight? If you're feeling timorous and fearful at the start of this sermon, you're feeling a lot worse now.

How is he going to help us? Well, I think the way that he helps us is remarkable. And he points us to the remedy again and again and again and again because he draws your attention back to God.

It's as though he's saying, all right, you're looking, in the mirror and you see a sinner and you go out and you see your family and your friends and what do you see? You see sinners. And the people who don't like you, they are sinners.

Well, where are you going to look now? And he says, you are to look up into the face of God. And he has this way of telling you over and over and over again. It starts in verse 14, but he just keeps repeating it.

[21 : 00] But I trust in you, oh Lord. I say, you are my God. My times are in your hands.

And then he says in verse 16, make your face shine on your servant. Save me in your steadfast love. Oh Lord, let me not be put to shame for I call on you.

Verse 19, how abundant is your goodness? Verse 20, in the cover of your presence you hide them.

Verse 21, blessed be the Lord for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me.

Verse 23, love the Lord, all you saints. the Lord preserves the faithful. But abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. Verse 24, be strong, let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord.

I think he does it so simply and so beautifully. He sets out the remedy for us that there's only one way forward, that you are to very deliberately take your eyes off yourself.

[22 : 12] You are to stop looking in the mirror because it will not change things. Stop looking at the faces around you so much and look at the face of God that shines in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he's telling us that that is where we're to fix our gaze. He's telling you that you can trust this God. You can trust him. You say, well I don't know if I can, I'm a sinner and I don't know if I can, there are sinful people all around me, but you can trust this God.

You can say to him, can't you, you are my God, my times are in your hands. My times are in your hands so you will rescue me from the hands of my enemy.

Everything is in his hands. And your time, that is what is in his hands in particular. Charles is very specifically, he doesn't need to look to his face, make your face to shine upon your servants.

Save me in your steadfast love. A love which is firm and fixed and secure and loyal and unchangeable. It's so deep that we call it sometimes the loving kindness of God.

[23 : 32] We try to put two words together to get to the depth of what it means. But even the word loving kindness isn't enough. It should be loving kindness, goodness, mercy or something like that.

And even that is weak. You have to look at his face to see what he's doing, to see what he's saying. You have to call on him. He is the one who can deal with your shame.

He's the one who can deal with the shame that you feel about yourself. He's the one who can deal with the shame that other people are putting upon you. And he reminds us that it is his goodness that we must remember.

Oh, how abundant is your goodness. You have stored up your goodness for those who fear you. It's a beautiful expression. It's like, imagine, imagine I've got a cupboard behind this lectern. And in it, it's filled with goodness. And I say, at the end of the service, you come up and I'll come out of my cupboard and I'll give you goodness.

[24 : 45] There's goodness for you. And the next one, there's, here's a big lump of goodness for you. Some of you are smiling. It's a rubbish illustration. But some of you will be thinking, I want some of the Lord's goodness.

goodness. And you're not good in your own thoughts because you see your own sin. And there may not be goodness surrounding you because there are sinners around you, but God is always good. He's good all the time. And all the time, God is good. And he's stored up his goodness for you. It's a beautiful picture, isn't it? What a glorious thing it is to have goodness stored up for us in order to give it to us.

In the church I grew up in, there were people who had sweets. The sermons were very long, very boring. And there were people that had sweets and they always had sweets.

And no matter how many times you ask them, we need people like this in this church, they'd give you sweets. You'd never see them without sweets. God has goodness. He has goodness.

[25 : 53] He's never without goodness. And he never gives it out in small doses. He is more than good. Look what it says in verse 21. Blessed be the Lord for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me.

That is, he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to you. He clings to you. He will not let you go. He knows that you see your own sin very, very clearly and he holds you tighter. He knows that there are sinners around you who are against you and he holds you tighter. Because God is always good and he protects you and he will provide for you. You thought you'd lost everything.

You thought you were cut off. But God, hear your voice. You're pleased when you cried to him. And so here he comes with this final exhortation. So this is what you are to do and we are to do as a church this year.

If you're discouraged and you're overwhelmed tonight, what are you to do? Verse 23, can you see it? Love God. Love the Lord, all you his saints.

[27 : 02] The Lord preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. So, be strong. Let your heart take courage.

All you who wait for the Lord. that's the Lord. Spurgeon preached a remarkable sermon on Psalm 31 in 1886. He says this, I know that a great many who are very sad and low in spirit come in here and their friends say to them, we wish that we could cheer you up.

I do not say that. But I do say this, be of good courage. Be of good courage. It is the Lord's command to you. Do you not think that your God deserves to be trusted?

What has he ever done that you should doubt him? Does he not deserve your most confident faith? And what do you expect to get out of your timidity? He that is afraid of the weather, can he change it?

He that says there will be a long frost, can he shorten it by a single day by fretting over it? There is a great depression in business and he will be ruined. Will he be less likely to be ruined by worrying?

[28 : 15] Seest thou not then that thy God deserves thy trust and that common wisdom bids thee be of good courage? I love it because it's biblical.

He doesn't simply say to you tonight, cheer up. No, he says, be strong. Let your heart take courage. Your sin will not overwhelm you.

Nor will the sin of any other because Jesus Christ loves you. Let's pray.