

The Greek poet Aeschylus wrote, **“He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”**

We learn wisdom through suffering. And God has shown us that the root of wisdom is the knowledge of the LORD. We know the LORD through suffering, for it is when your foundations have been shaken, when your head is underwater, when your soul is surrounded by enemies that one really learns his own destitution and the never-failing sufficiency of God.

Yet, the path of wisdom is a disaster. It is ugly and snotty and bloody and dark. Yet, God does not bemoan the expression of such fears and failures, frustrations and faithlessness, or any other such ‘negative’ emotions. In fact, these are the means by which we grow in our knowledge of Him. As Charles Spurgeon put it, “I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me upon the Rock of Ages.” Yet, somehow we fear it. So, God is faithful, above all other things for us, to show us Himself, even if it requires the long road of ugly cries in the darkness and frantic despairing cries in the pit. For, it is not strength which remains silent when sorrow and suffering and shame overwhelm the soul, it is obstinacy. It is “guarding worthless lies” to pretend our hearts are strong and faithful when our very world has been undone.

Psalm 31 is a prayer. It is a public prayer of sorrow, of regret, of shame, of fear, which was so demonstratively a part of Hebrew worship, so universally the experience of the human soul, that it is quoted by Jeremiah numerous times (6:25; 20:3,10; 46:5; 49:29; Lam 2:22), by Jonah as a part of his repentance from the belly of the great fish (Jon 2:8), by the psalmist of Psalm 71 who took refuge in the Lord by quoting the first three verses of Psalm 31, and most significantly by our Lord Jesus Himself, who drank from this Psalm so deeply that His last words upon the cross was a line from this psalm expressing both fear and faith, sorrow and hope, “I entrust my spirit into your hands.”

It is when we are weak that we are strong, Paul wrote. It is when we are humble that we find honor. It is when we are repentant that we are saved. This Psalm expresses the cries of the heart of the sufferer, whether for one’s own sin or because one has been sinned against, whether the turmoil is of the inner kind, the soulful despair of loneliness or emptiness, or the outer kind of scheming, planning, abusive men against us when we have not done them wrong. It is an expression of a man who has lost much, who is needy, who is desperate, who is guilty, who is broken, and who is decisively afraid.

In it we find a companion in the faith, an honest man who has felt the sharp rocks pierce his feet at the bottom of the valley of the shadow of death. In it we find the singular faith which both laments God’s permission of such suffering and also praises Him for His promised goodness.

In it, may we learn to cry out, so that we may become wise in the knowledge of our God. Let us learn that we do not find our hope or honor in stoic silence, but in angsty cries of desperation to the God who hears such wailings, who sees our afflictions, who knows our pains, and who sent His one and only Son to redeem and restore and complete our story of fruition after a long defeat.

1. PRAYERS are Addressed to the Powerful One: “Deliver me!”
 - a. TO: “O LORD, my mountain stronghold” (v1)
 - i. To the person whom one trusts has the capability and the character to help
 - ii. THE LORD IS CAPABLE:
 1. “You are my stable and secure mountain stronghold” (v3)
 - a. This “mountain stronghold”, or “refuge”, is a repetitive theme in the psalm
 - b. God alone is our safety, our capable provider, in our time of such need

- c. He is our refuge, our place to run and hide when we are overwhelmed by afflictions, shame, accusations, dangers, and threats
 - 2. “Your renown is on the line” (v3b)
 - a. Here the psalmist claims that God’s reputation is on the line
 - 3. “You lead me” & “You help me along” (v3b)
 - 4. “You bring me up out of the net which they secretly laid for me” (v4)
 - a. In the darkness, when I am trapped – in the fog of despair, when I have been captured
 - b. God pulls me out and leads me out – He rescues me both from the wicked plans of the Enemy, but also guides me on the path of holiness and life
- iii. THE LORD IS AWARE:
 - 1. “You have seen my affliction” (v7b)
 - a. He not only sees it, but enters into it!
 - 2. “You have known the distress of my soul” (v7c)
 - a. He not only is cognizant of it, but He has experienced it!
 - 3. “You have set my feet in safety (the open place)” (v8b)
 - a. He sets your feet upon the feet of His Son!
- b. Prayer Expresses Dependent Actions:
 - i. Present: “I entrust my Spirit into *your* hand” (v5)
 - 1. Prayers of faith are those please which, though buffeted by fear and anxiety, also and at the same time *entrust* one’s very life to the LORD
 - a. To entrust means to hand something over to another with confidence that they will protect it, provide for it, and care for it
 - 2. “You have ransomed my Spirit, God of TRUTH” (v5b)
 - a. I can entrust my very life to the LORD because He has proven his care for me by ransoming me, paying the cost for my life with the blood of His own Son
 - b. And He is the God of TRUTH, who is always faithful to His promise, never fails to deliver what He has covenanted to do
 - ii. Present: “I hate those who work to protect worthless lies” (v6)
 - 1. *Hate* here is defined in opposition to “entrust” – not disgust or disdain, but rather “I will separate from them, I will not entrust my spirit to them”
 - 2. The reason is because “They enslaved me through empty lies” (opposition to God of TRUTH who pays freedom price for me)
 - a. There are those who work hard to protect their pretense, who hide the truth because it serves their own purpose
 - i. It is like an Edward Jones agent who hid the truth about the money which you had placed into his hands to care for, but who instead worked to protect his empty lies so that he gained for himself
 - ii. There are people who treat others like that, who work harder to hide the truth because it serves their purpose, who manipulate the spirits of those who have entrusted themselves to them and use them
 - iii. Future: “I will shout joyfully” (v7)
 - 1. Even though the present struggle and pain is real and intense, David clings to the future hope of shouting joyfully in redemption, in wholeness, in the restoration of his spirit

2. Do you think that Jesus, after entrusting His spirit to the Father, shouted joyfully upon His resurrection?
- iv. Future: “I will rejoice in your covenant love” (v7)
 1. This future joy is in the context of God keeping His promise because of His great love
 2. This word, *chesed*, translated “steadfast love”, is the word which God uses to describe His commitment to His own promise, His covenant to be with His people, to redeem His people, and to unite Himself to His people

2. PRAYERS of the TERRIFIED: “Be gracious to me!” (v9)

a. Prayer Expresses Need of the Powerless:

- i. “Rescue me!” (v2)
 1. “Quickly!”
 - a. I love this...NOW! ☺
 - b. This is the cry of a desperate man, not merely a needy one
 - c. He wants to be taken out of his situation right now, and so he is asking for it
 - i. Faith does not hold back its deepest desires, while at the same time entrusting its spirit to the One who is capable and good
 2. “In your righteousness”
 - a. The basis of God’s salvation is not my righteousness, but His
 - b. What I really need in every situation is God’s righteousness to move God’s hand to work for my deliverance in every way
 - i. This explains why Paul so vehemently argues that we need the righteousness of God in order to be saved from sin and death, not merely our righteousness to be strengthened or perfected
 - ii. 1 Cor 1:30-31 – “He has become to us righteousness...”
 - iii. Romans 3:22 – “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who entrust...”
 - ii. “Bend Your ear to me!” (v2)
 1. Make every effort to listen to the cries of my heart
 - iii. “Hide me!” (v2)
 1. I want to be hidden from these things which threaten to destroy me
 - iv. “Be my strong home!” (v2)
 1. This is an interesting request!
 2. We all want to belong in the household of the LORD, not merely to be accepted in, but to *belong*
 3. By asking the LORD to be his home, he is asking for more than merely protection, but for belonging, for the security of a child in the arms of a loving father
 - a. To be at home in the Lord is to be able to go into the Father’s presence with honest pleas, with ugly fears, and to leave with peaceful calm when all around is in turmoil.
 - b. The psalmist is asking for this peaceful home because he does not feel so calm in the moment
- b. Expressing *overwhelming* need (v10ff): “I am overwhelmed”
- i. b/c of FEAR: “I have been bound up”
 1. Tied up, constricted, constrained, trapped, enclosed, squeezed
 - ii. b/c of SORROW: My grief overwhelms me
 1. Tears – “eye dissolves”

- iii. b/c of WEAKNESS: “My strength is gone”
 - 1. Physical and emotional exhaustion – “my body & soul have come to an end”
 - a. “Years groan”
 - b. “Strength totters”
 - i. **“Because of my guilt”**
 - c. “Bones waste away”
 - 2. In this instance, it is David’s guilt which has made him feel so desperately ended
 - a. It’s significant that David’s enemies were still condemning him after God had forgiven him. They were talking against him, making his name a reproach (31:1, 11, 13, 17, 20). And, what’s more, at least some of the charges were true! But David’s enemies didn’t appreciate the sincerity of David’s repentance or the magnitude of God’s grace.
 - b. We must never condone sin, but we must be careful not to condemn repentant sinners. Thank God that He is gracious and through the blood of Jesus forgives all our sin, or none of us could be here today! Yes, in His loving righteousness He makes us suffer the temporal consequences of our sin. But we need to encourage repentant sinners who are suffering those consequences, even then to take refuge in God’s grace and love.
- iv. b/c of SHAME: The story of my demise is known to all
 - 1. People flee me – my shame makes me feel repulsive
 - a. b/c what they know of me is dreadful
 - b. When they see me in the street, they go the other way
 - c. I am repulsive to them
 - 2. People forget me – my shame makes me feel invisible
 - a. Like I have died and no longer am present
 - b. “I am invisible” – nobody sees me, understands me, I feel completely and utterly alone
 - 3. I am hollow – my shame makes me feel worthless
 - a. Like an empty jar
 - b. Without a soul
 - c. I feel empty inside, like there is no life in me
- v. b/c of WICKED MEN: I feel surrounded by wicked people seeking to capture me
 - 1. Terror on every side
 - 2. Conspiracy and plans schemed out to capture my soul

3. Prayer Expresses the Faith of the Petrified:

- a. Expressing *adversative* actions: “BUT I depend upon you, O Lord” (v14)
 - i. My feelings are not my mountain stronghold
 - 1. My feelings are legitimately felt, but they are terrible at showing me what is true, right, or good, and certainly not what is ultimate
 - 2. Like a magnet that can pull a compass off true north, fears will pull our hearts’ away from what is true and send us into the deep, dark, forests of despair
 - ii. My fears are not my mountain stronghold
 - 1. My fears are based upon what I believe to be true, whether or not it actually is true or final
 - 2. When I feel alone because I believe that God cannot see me or does not care about me, then I am afraid
 - 3. But, has God really left me when I suffer? Is my suffering caused by the oversight of God?

- a. Did Jesus suffer because the Father forgot about him? Because the Father was not with Him in the valley of the shadow of death?
 - iii. My own faithfulness is not my mountain stronghold
 - 1. Even when I doubt God's promise, my salvation is not contingent upon my faithfulness, but God's faithfulness to His promise
 - 2. "Even when we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." (2 Tim 2:13)
 - iv. I will depend upon the LORD
 - 1. The covenant maker, whose name means "I am with you!"
 - 2. Exodus 3
 - b. Expressing faith *out loud*: "I SPEAK, 'You are my God!'" (v14b)
 - i. When your heart is speaking to you, speak the words of God instead
 - ii. You hear the preacher on Sunday morning for 45 minutes, but you listen to yourself all week long, every single day:
 - 1. You must learn to speak the word of God to yourself!
 - 2. Faith speaks to your own soul, "Why are you downcast, o *my soul*, and why are you in turmoil within me? Put your hope in God, for I will praise Him again, for He is my salvation!" (ps 42)
 - iii. "My times are in your hand" (v15)
 - 1. And it is a faithful, loving hand who ransomed you for Himself
 - 2. It is the hand of the mountain stronghold, your home and your security
 - 3. It is the hand which would be nailed to the cross, which would extend itself to bear the blow due to me because of my guilt
 - 4. I can trust that hand with my times
 - iv. (IF SHORT ON TIME, SKIP TO POINT 5)
4. Prayer POURS OUT its Fears with Ferocity: A long series of requests come pouring out of a heart overwhelmed and needy:
 - a. "Snatch me up!" (v15b)
 - i. From the hand of my enemies, those who pursue me to exploit me
 - b. "Cause your face to shine upon me!" (v16)
 - i. This is a deep request for the presence of the LORD
 - 1. To know His favor, His blessing, to SEE it, to KNOW it, to comprehend in the depths of the soul the favor and blessing and kindnesses of the Lord
 - 2. It is a request to move from perseverant faith in His promise to an experience, a taste, an assurance of His love
 - ii. "your servant"
 - 1. Even in this request, there is no element of a demand, of a right, but rather a humble request from an inferior to a superior
 - c. "Come to my aid!" (v16b)
 - i. "according to your covenantal love"
 - ii. *Because you promised!*
 - d. "Don't let me be ashamed" (v17)
 - i. "because I call out to you"
 - ii. The answer for our shame is not the absence of our weakness, failure, or guilt, but is found in calling out to the Lord
 - 1. That is, when we are ashamed, we regain honor by calling out to God
 - 2. By calling out to the Lord we find an answer for our guilt: the mercy of God
 - e. "Let the guilty ones be ashamed" (v17b)
 - i. "because they are silent all the way to the grave"

- ii. Here is the primary difference between the “guilty” and “the faithful”
 - 1. The faithful cry out to the LORD for help
 - 2. The guilty are silent all the way to the grave
 - a. Silent = does not cry out to the LORD for help, for mercy, to answer for shame
- iii. Our hearts, upon feeling the shame of our foolishness, weakness, or guilt, often assume that the solution is our own righteousness
 - 1. To do what is right, to make up for what we did, to ‘tip the scales’ of our shame into the ‘good’ category
 - a. We assume that our goodness = no shame
- iv. But here we see that in the economy of the Lord the qualification for “unashamed” is not the absence of foolishness, failure, or guilt, but rather the absence of crying out for salvation
 - 1. Romans 10:9-10
- f. “Let the deceitful lips be mute” (v18)
 - i. I still want liars to be silenced
 - 1. The TRUTH matters greatly to the LORD and to His people
 - ii. “because they speak against the righteous”
 - 1. There are those who twist the truth, who deceive and lie to achieve their own purposes
 - 2. This deceit is always that which consumes the righteous b/
 - iii. “because their lips are arrogant”
 - 1. “self-righteous and contemptuous”
 - 2. Deceit that is against the righteous is arrogant, self-righteous, and contemptuous
 - a. It elevates one’s own power, or perceived power, and diminishes the honor of others, most clearly devalues and demeans the LORD Himself, the truly right one
 - b. It is, therefore, contemptuous of others because it doesn’t even think of them as those to be honored, but rather as those to be used to gain power or pleasure from
 - iv. Righteousness always delights in the truth
 - 1. Eph 4:24 – “put on the new self, created in the likeness of God in righteousness and the dedication of the truth”
 - 2. Eph 5:9 – “for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good, right, and true...”
- 5. Prayer Remembers the PROMISES:
 - a. “How numerous are your good things!” (v19)
 - i. God has stored up good things for his “fearful ones”
 - 1. Look at the compassion in God’s attitude here – He KNOWS that you are afraid
 - 2. He stores up goodness for those who are afraid
 - a. Do you not see again, O cowering Christian, that the only necessity which is required to see God store up goodness for you is your great need?
 - b. So come needy! Come messy! Come scared! Come questioning and confused, but come dependent.
 - ii. God has worked for these good things and gives them to those who cry out in dependence and run to Him for safety
 - 1. God works good for those who cry out to Him – not those who have succeeded in their own work

2. God works...for those
 - iii. God works these good things in the presence of all mankind
 1. It will be known, so we do not need to fear the shame and contempt of “the sons of mankind”
 2. So much of our fear is founded on what people think of us, or what we think people will think of us
 - a. This “fear of man” shatters our confidence, wounds our hope, and amputates our joy
 - b. Yet, God says that the goodness which He has stored up for you will be known in the presence of all
 - i. Their accusations and abuse and contempt will be answered by the roar which formed the cosmos, when He announces that His needy and desperate people receive all His good inheritance
 - ii. “Loved by the LORD” is your name – “God’s own possession” is your title
 - iii. And everyone will see it and wonder...
 - b. “You will hide your ‘fearful ones’, your dependent, needy people, in your presence” (v20)
 - i. They are found in the hidden place of your presence
 1. YOU ARE FOUND!
 2. Consider this great and precious promise: You belong in the presence of the LORD because of His covenantal love
 - a. It is not that you are merely “allowed” into His presence – YOU ARE FOUND THERE because CHRIST is found there and He holds you by the power of His own life.
 - b. IN CHRIST You belong there!
 - ii. Away from the enslavement of man
 1. They are ultimately safe from the captivators
 - a. Romans 8:35-39 – ‘NOTHING is able to separate from God’s covenant love towards you’
 - iii. Away from the accusing tongues
 1. The accusers’ accusations will hold no weight, not because you lived like Jesus, but because JESUS stands between you and your accuser to answer for you
 2. The Enemy will bring up your guilt, your weakness, your losses, your pains, your failures, your wickedness – but your answer is hidden in the presence of God: IT IS THE CHRIST who answers for you
 - a. Apart from Him you are guilty
 - b. Apart from Him you are wicked
 - c. Apart from Him you have only loss and death and futility and shame
 - d. BUT YOU ARE NOT APART FROM HIM – You are bound to Him and He to you by faith, which is dependence, needy crying out
 - e. This is why you can “entrust your spirit into the hand of the LORD” when everything around you is going wrong
6. Prayer PRAISES the Powerful One: “May the LORD be blessed” (v21)
 - a. To be blessed means to be either given or acknowledged as having all the power in an situation
 - i. Therefore, to bless the LORD is to acknowledge that He is worthy of all power, dominion, honor, right, and praise
 1. 1 Tim 1:17 – written to fearful and timid and anxious Timothy
 2. Jude 1:25 – written to a people being influenced by wicked false teachers

3. Eph 3:20-21 – written in the context of our “outer man wasting away, but our inner man being renewed daily” by an apprehension of God’s love
 - ii. What is amazing is how God uses His power – He covenants in love to sinners whose only asset is their great need for mercy
- b. He is to be praised because He has done goodness in the most surprising of places: in despondency (v21)
 - i. This is a surprising truth!
 1. He is not to be praised only when our circumstances are comfortable, but even when our city is still besieged, because He is working good for us even there
 - ii. The LORD does good to us when we are despondent
 1. So despondent that we have said, “The LORD doesn’t even see me.” (v22)
 - a. This feeling of loneliness, of abandonment, of invisibility in our suffering is not uncommon fare for the people of God
 - b. This is not because God does not see, but because we only see the besieging forces
 - i. I am assuming that none of you have been in a besieged city, a city surrounded by enemy forces, who have cut off supplies of food and help, who are slowly starving you out, increasing your suffering and plight day by day by day
 - ii. Yet, many of you know despondency – of being besieged by sorrow, or even by lies – of being bound not by outside forces, but by your own body, besieged by ailments which have trapped you to your bed, day by day slowly ebbing your resources away
 - c. It is here, says the Psalmist, in the city under siege, with the enemies surround you, with the question of God’s nearness ringing from your lips and your eyes dissolved into rivers of sorrow and grief, that God is doing good
 - i. It is the Gospel principle
 1. When your beloved friend kisses you on the cheek and you hear the clink of 30 pieces of silver in his back pocket, God is doing good
 2. When your anxiety is so great, your despondency so deep, that your sweat mingles with your blood in desperation, God is doing good
 3. When you are stripped naked, exposed to those who would shame you, who insult you, who flee from you in disgust...”Lord, I entrust my spirit into your hands... You will ransom me back from this death”
 2. Yet, God hears our cries of neediness *certainly* (v22b)
 - a. Ah, this word “certainly”!
 - i. This certainty cannot be based upon the circumstances, for the city is besieged
 - ii. The certainty must be based upon God’s promise – He hears, He sees, He knows, He is storing up and working good...for those who cry out to Him
 - b. How can we entrust our spirits into His hands?
 - i. We remember who He is
 1. He is sovereign over our circumstances...and He isn’t finished with our story

2. He is good to His fearful ones...and His storehouses are filling up
 3. He is the God of covenantal love...and He always keeps His promises
 - ii. We remember what He has done
 1. He has done numerous good things already
 2. The preeminent good is found in His Son, whom He gave freely to redeem us from our sins by laying down His own life
 - a. You are not forgotten by God...remember the Incarnation
 - b. You are not invisible to God...remember the Word made flesh
 - c. You are not condemned by God...remember the cross of Christ
 - d. You are not abandoned by God...remember the resurrection of the Christ and the gift of His Spirit
 3. God's goodness to us is NOT contingent upon the strength of our faith, but is only contingent upon "His righteousness" and "His covenantal love"!
- c. Therefore...

7. How, Then, Shall We Respond in our Sorrow?

- a. LOVE THE LORD!
 - i. For He has covenanted to you...with His own blood (Eucharist)
 - ii. For He is guarding the truthful ones
 - iii. For He is making all things right
 1. And upon the rest, the untruthful ones, who do things arrogantly, who do not cry out to Him but are silent to the grave...He will make it right
- b. FIRM UP!
 - i. Be brave, for your God is your mountain stronghold
 - ii. Be strong in your heart, for your God is your mountain stronghold
 - iii. Place your hope upon the LORD, for He cares for you more deeply than you can fathom, and even when your eyes cannot see through the fog of your suffering, He hears your cries, He knows your affliction, He sees your suffering...and He flies to your aid with arms nailed open wide to redeem you

The Heidelberg Catechism

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I am not my own, but belong—
 body and soul, in life and in death—
 to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.
 He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
 and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.
 He also watches over me in such a way
 that not a hair can fall from my head
 without the will of my Father in heaven;
 in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.
 Because I belong to him,
 Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
 assures me of eternal life

and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.