

PSALM 31: GOD IS GLORIOUS

praying psalm 31 to undermine your need for approval

Grace to the Humble

Underneath our desire for the approval of others is a deep pride, the belief that others *should* acknowledge us, and that when they aren't, it's because they've not yet seen how amazing we are! Though we may seem humble, it is often false humility, believing that we can perform in order to win peoples' approval. David seems to be getting at this in v.23: "The LORD preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride." Faithful literally means "holding on in trust" and is synonymous with the one who "waits" for the LORD in v.24. In other words, there are two ways to approach life. You can try to make yourself something, often dependent on the approval and acceptance of others; or, you can accept the truth that you aren't much of anything, and in humility experience the heart-strengthening, courage-producing, joy-stirring love of God. The "faithful" are those who hold on to the abundant goodness and steadfast love of the LORD with fierce tenacity, refusing to allow anyone else define them and give them a sense of identity and worth.

Abundant Goodness Through Jesus

Psalm 31 invites you to repent of your pride daily. You aren't that amazing. In fact, your fear of man means that God's abundant goodness is *not* stored up for you, and that what you really deserve is to be abundantly repaid for your pride. That's what you deserve. But the glorious good news is that *you don't get what you deserve*. There's only been one person who deserved God's abundant goodness, only one who perfectly feared God, only one who lived for God's approval alone. Jesus Christ was the only man who has never allowed the crowds to define him. He is the one who could perfectly say, "Into your hands I commit my spirit," trusting fully in his Father's approval.

But we also know that Jesus quoted that verse on the cross, as the Father *turned his face away*. Jesus took what we deserve, was abundantly repaid for our pride, and swallowed God's just hatred of our arrogance. In the cross we find the humility and approval we most deeply need: God turned his face away from Jesus because of me, so that he could turn his face to shine on me!

PSALM 31: GOD IS GLORIOUS

so we don't have to fear others

Preaching To Ourselves

Christians get some funny ideas in their heads sometimes. One of the funniest - or saddest, depending on how you look at it - is the idea you become a Christian by trusting Jesus, but that you grow as a Christian by trying hard to live up to God's standards. Even though we know we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus because we *can't* live up to God's standards, we go on to live as if we maintain fellowship with God by trying hard to live up to his standards! We look at our day-to-day performance - avoiding sin, trying to read the bible and pray, and church involvement - as the primary way to know whether or not God is pleased with us *today*. The result is that we either fake it, pretending like all is well while we are hiding sins of the heart, or we live in despair and frustration, constantly wondering why we keep struggling with the same things.

In Christianity, true and lasting change happens in the same way that true salvation happens: through repentance of sin and rejoicing in the work of Christ on our behalf. Real, lasting growth as Christians happens not by working hard to be good ("stapling fruit to the tree") but by trusting fully ("sending the roots down deep") in the work of Christ on our behalf, and drawing life and nourishment from Him. The Psalms show us what it looks like to do just that.

One of the best ways to do this is through the practice of meditation: reminding yourself of who God is and what He's done. "The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say: 'I shall yet praise Him'" (Martin Lloyd Jones). This is Christian meditation: taking God's word and truth and soaking in it until it begins to reshape our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

The Psalms help us learn how to "handle" ourselves, taking our thoughts and emotions captive so they don't run our lives, and teaching us to "plant" ourselves firmly in the truth about who God is and what God has done.

Psalm 31

One of the best ways to get at what really drives and animates our lives is to reflect on what we most fear. Much of our behavior - both positive and negative - is driven by fear. Often, we are most afraid of people. We're shaped by people's opinions of us, and live as if there is a crowd judging our every move. We fear what people think of us, what they say about us, and what they might do to us. We experience anxiety around people because they want something from us or have expectations of us that we don't know or can't meet. Sometimes it is our parents and those we most love whose opinion of us has profoundly shaped us. Words they have spoken to us, expectations they've placed on us, or affirmation they've withheld from us have deeply wounded us. We often live with a sense of emptiness, hoping others will fill the void in our souls.

What do you fear? Are you motivated by what people might be thinking of you? Do you find yourself anxious around those whose opinion matters to you? Do you try to "be someone" in order to be accepted and approved of by certain people? The bible calls this the "fear of man," and it is the root of much of our negative emotions and sinful behaviors.

In Psalm 31, David is wrestling with this very reality. The first verse makes it clear: "Don't let me be put to shame!" David has lots of enemies, people who not only want to take his life (literally!) but also who are spreading lies about him and slandering him (v.18), whispering plans to harm him (v.13), and even his friends are threatening to abandon him (v.11-12). Throughout this Psalm, David speaks of a group of people - "they!" - who are against him and whose opinions of him threaten to be more weighty and defining than God himself. Most of us have a "they" as well, and though our "they" may be mostly in our heads, our "they" are no less real a threat than David's.

Is God Glorious?

We see David wrestling back and forth with a simple question: Whose opinion is most glorious or weighty, theirs or God's? Who will he "fear," God or man? Like many of us, what David sees and hears - the voices of this crowd - is threatening to be more glorious than God! What happens when the thoughts, opinions, and lies of the crowd - real or imagined - become more important to us than who God is and what God has done? What happens when the acceptance and approval of others begins to feel more real than God's, when we're tempted to fear man more than we fear God? To use the language of Psalm 1

(see previous studies), our lives become like chaff - empty and blown about. We might become anxious and fearful, lacking the courage to speak honestly for fear of how people might respond. Or, we might become really outgoing, feeding off the smiles, hugs, and attention of others. Sometimes we'll flip-flop back and forth, riding on the roller coaster of peoples' approval.

God IS Glorious!

Psalm 31 is David's meditation on the glory of God versus the glory of man. As Jones said above, he's showing us how he handles himself when man's opinion becomes more important, glorious, and weighty than God's. This is how he preaches to himself the truth about who God is and what God has done until his heart is free from the fear of man. David is honest about what he is currently experiencing, not downplaying the temptation to be overwhelmed by the opinions and lies of these people. In some sections, it seems that he feels like he's drowning (v.10) and there is no escape (v.13). Before he does anything else, David brings his fear of man before God in honest confession.

But David is not content to stop there. He moves on to what he knows to be true about his God *despite his current experience*. "You are my rock and my fortress... you take me out of the net they have hidden for me" (v.3-4). "You have redeemed me" he says (v.5), and "you have set my feet in a broad place" (v.8). David is preaching to himself about who God is and what God has done. He's refusing to allow the crowd to define him and dictate his emotions or actions. "I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love," he says, for "you have heard the voice of my pleas for mercy." And because of who God is and what God has done, David has the courage to pray, "Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!" (v.16). David is coming to believe - again - that God's opinion of him is more glorious - weighty - than the crowds'.

God is Glorious, So We Don't Have to Fear Others

As David ends his meditation, he begins to rejoice as the truth he knows becomes real: "Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me!" The "abundant goodness" of the LORD is "stored up for those who fear" God, and David is now fearing God more than man. He's no longer allowing the crowd to define him and dictate his emotions and actions. He's rejoicing in God's abundant goodness and steadfast love, and he's free from the need to have the acceptance and approval of others. David knows that God is glorious: his steadfast love is all that matters, so he doesn't need to fear others!