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Psalm 31

In Jewish tradition, Psalms, poems and songs and prayers to YHWH, are recited on behalf of the sick, invoking divine mercy for their healing. Psalm 31 is among the Psalms considered exceptionally appropriate for praying for the ill.

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1228223/jewish/Psalms-and-Jewish-Prayer-for-Healing.htm, accessed 5/1/2026.) I find that comforting, to have a script. A link to all the appropriate psalms for praying for healing is in my printed sermon, or email me and I'll send it to you.

Psalm 31 is my favorite psalm. Unfortunately, the version of the psalm the lectionary gives us today is savagely abridged. We are given verses 1-5, then the middle is gutted.

The Psalm begins with petition, "*I seek refuge in you, don't let me be put to shame, deliver me. . . incline your ear to me, deliver me. . .*" then a few words of praise, "*you are my rock and my fortress. . .*" and then the psalmist returns to petition, "*lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me.*"

Seeking refuge from what? Take me out of what hidden net? The missing verses answer these questions. The missing verses are cries of lament, of weariness, of complaint. But first, some cursing.

There are a few imprecatory prayers, prayers that call down judgment upon others. Verse 6, reads, "you hate those who worship idols. . . Verse 17, "Let them go dumbfounded to sheol". Or, as Catholic writer Hilaire Belloc puts it, "May all my enemies go to hell, Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel."

I've waited a long time to use that in a sermon. I'm not telling you you should curse your enemies. But it is biblical. Let me do a quick theology cleanse, lest you report me to the Bishop, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who hurt us.

Psalm 31 is my favorite because it relates deep human suffering, what seems to be psychological suffering from depression or grief. Verses 9 and 10,

*Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.*

*For my life is spent with sorrow
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.*

Depression tells us we don't belong here, that no one cares. Grief isolates us from all the other normal, happy people. Sometimes people avoid us when we're in crisis as if it might be contagious. Verse 11:

*I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.*

*I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.*

This last line so perfectly encapsulates the cold isolation of emotional suffering.

"I am like a dead man forgotten, a thing thrown away."

Other translations read,

I am forgotten, out of mind like the dead;

I am like a worn-out tool. (New American Bible)

A broken ax handle comes to mind. Or a dull drill bit. The literal translation is destroyed pottery. I am shattered like an [intentionally] broken dish. Useless.

The Message Bible, which is more an interpretation than a translation— or as my husband Joseph says, “It’s way out there,”— *The Message* presents Psalm 31 thusly,

My life leaks away, groan by groan;

my years fade out in sighs.

My troubles have worn me out,

turned my bones to powder.

To my enemies I’m a monster;

I’m ridiculed by the neighbors.

My friends are horrified;

they cross the street to avoid me.

They want to blot me from memory,

forget me like a corpse in a grave,

discard me like a broken dish in the trash.

Jesus did not remain in the tomb and I will not leave you here sitting in pottery shards. Where do we go from here? Where does the psalmist take us?

Twice the psalmist calls out to God’s steadfast love. In verse 7, we read

I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,

because you have seen my affliction;

you have known the distress of my soul (ESV)

We can, in our affliction, still rejoice and be glad in God's "steadfast love", love expressed in Hebrew with one word, (*che.sed* - חֶסֶד). *Che.sed* encapsulates a broad sense of loving kindness, goodness, and faithfulness.

All that we desire a good God to be, the perfect love that surpasses even that of the best parents on earth, the glimpse of perfect healing revealed in a flash in contemplation, that is *che.sed*.

Che.sed, loving kindness, occurs 247 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. To characterize the God of the Hebrew scriptures as vengeful or unforgiving in an antisemitic trope.

In Exodus, the LORD passed before Moses and proclaimed, "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. . .*" (Exodus 34:7).

In Isaiah, we read, "*For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,*" says the LORD, who has compassion on you." (Isaiah 54:10)

Jewish leader Nehemiah's prays, "*And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night. . .*" (Neh 1:5-6).

Returning to the psalm, starting at verse 14,

*But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."*

Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann describes this expression as "Primal Trust". He relates it to "The Basic Trust" described by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. Basic trust "the most elemental trust that a baby begins to have in its mother—trusting that

the mother is reliably concerned and attentive even when not visibly present” (Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 74).

God sees our affliction. The God who created us can contain our sorrow. The God who took on flesh has sanctified the human experience in all its emotions. We can trust in God’s unrelenting, steadfast love.

Brueggemann asserts that in our relationship with God, to be fully human is “to have a profound, unshakable elemental trust in YHWH as reliable, present, strong, concerned, engaged for; and like Erikson’s child, to live and act on the basis of that confidence, even when YHWH is not visible and circumstance attests to the contrary” (Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 74).

We verbalize this trust every time we pray aloud communally whenever we say, “Amen.” Amen means verily, truly, so be it—it is an affirmation of belief. I invite you now to proclaim that trust, despite the circumstances. Let the people say “Amen.”

Let us pray:

For those us whose hearts are broken by grief,

*We rejoice and are glad in your steadfast love,
because you have seen our affliction;
you have known the distress of our soul. Amen!* (Psalm 31:7)

For those suffering from addiction or mental illness,

¹*Let your face shine upon your servants;
save us in your steadfast love. Amen!* (Psalm 31:1)

For relief from the anxiety besetting us as a country from civil unrest, attacks on democracy, and an unjust war,

Love the LORD, all you his saints.

The LORD preserves the faithful

but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.

Be strong, and let your heart take courage,

*all you who wait for the LORD. **Amen!** (Psalm 31: 23-24)*

Or as the Message Bible puts it,

Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up.

*Expect GOD to get here soon. **AMEN!***