

Psalm 31

Good Friday
9th Sunday Year A
Office of Readings Monday Week 2
verses 1-5 Night Prayer Wednesday

The psalmist has experienced a serious breakdown as a result of the way others are treating him. He remembers God's love and goodness and the times when his trust in God has been vindicated. He struggles to find that trust again and to invite others to join him in it. The psalm is written by a person who sees himself as belonging to those bonded to God by fidelity to the covenant (the ḥasidim, verse 23). He seems to draw on the experience of David as a model.

The psalm is composed in the form of a judicial process. See the article 'Legal System' in the Introduction. The psalmist does not claim to be without fault (verse 10), but he is innocent of that of which he is being accused (verse 18) and wants justice, not revenge, against his enemies. The title reads: 'To the leader. A psalm* of David'.

The psalmist is in danger. He has made a decision to turn to YHWH, trusting in God's justice. If God does not respond it will show that he is not in favour with God and this will bring shame upon him.

He asks to be shown how to get out of the trap he is in, pleading with YHWH to be for him now the God he is known to be, the liberating God he has been for him in the past.

¹In you, YHWH*, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your justice* be my security.

²Come close to hear me; come quickly to rescue me. Be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress that saves* me.

³You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for the sake of your name lead me and guide me;

⁴disentangle me from the net that tightens around me, for you are my defence.

'Spirit' translates the Hebrew *rûah* [רוח]. It means 'breath', and, since God gives life to us by sharing his 'breath' with us (Genesis 2:7), it means the life which we have from God:

In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

– Job 12:10

Luke places these words on the lips of the dying Jesus (see Luke 23:46). Compare the dying words of Stephen in Acts 7:59.

^{5a}Into your hands I commit my spirit.

God watches over us

**^{5b}You have redeemed me,
YHWH, faithful God.**

**⁶You hate those who venerate
worthless idols.**

**As for me, I place my trust*
in YHWH.**

**⁷I will exult and celebrate
your kindness* because you
have seen my affliction;**

**you have watched over me*
while I was in danger.**

**⁸You have not put me at the
mercy of the enemy; you
have set my feet in a broad
open place.**

The psalmist is remembering past graces and appealing anew to God's faithfulness.

We might reflect on the ways we give ourselves over to things that are without real value. Note the following:

Thus says YHWH: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

– Jeremiah 2:5

YHWH heeds the cry of the poor:

Then YHWH said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings.'

– Exodus 3:7

The people believed; and when they heard that YHWH had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped.

– Exodus 4:31

We cried to YHWH, the God of our ancestors; YHWH heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

– Deuteronomy 26:7

'Me' translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. God keeps guard over his life and much more. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction.

By your favour, YHWH, you had established me on a secure mountain.

– Psalm 30:7

Who is God if not YHWH?
Who is a rock if not our God?
God, who girds me with strength,
and completes my way,
makes my feet like those of a deer, and sets me
secure on the heights.

– Psalm 18:31-33

When he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet.

– Ezekiel 2:2

The psalmist begins to list his physical, psychological and emotional ills. It is these inner sufferings that are intended by the word ‘soul’, which translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See the article ‘Being’ in the Introduction. He experiences the pain in the pit of his stomach,

⁹Be gracious* to me, YHWH, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul* too and my stomach.

¹⁰My life is spent in sorrow, and my years go by in sighing; my strength fails because of my guilt*, and my bones waste away.

Jeremiah echoes some of the sentiments expressed here:

YHWH, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughing stock all day long; everyone mocks me.

– Jeremiah 20:7

Literally ‘I have passed out of people’s heart’ (Hebrew *lēb, לֵב*). See the article ‘Heart’ in the Introduction. Paul echoes these words:

We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

– 1Corinthians 4:13

Jeremiah 20:3, 10 also uses the expression ‘bird of ill omen’ (or ‘terror all around’). See also in reference to the young king taken into exile when Jerusalem was captured by Nebuchadnezzar:

Is this man Coniah a despised broken pot, a vessel no one wants? Why are he and his offspring hurled out and cast away in a land that they do not know?

– Jeremiah 22:28

The situation during the destruction of Jerusalem is expressed in the Book of Lamentations:

Blindly they wandered through the streets, so defiled with blood that no one was able to touch their garments. ‘Away! Unclean!’ people shouted at them; ‘Away! Away! Do not touch!’ So they became fugitives and wanderers; it was said among the nations, ‘They shall stay here no longer.’

– Lamentation 4:14-15

¹¹I am the scorn of all my adversaries, my neighbours enjoy themselves at my expense. I am an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street run the other way.

¹²No one thinks of me. It is as though I was dead; I have become like a useless pot.

¹³For I hear the whispering of many – ‘a bird of ill omen!’ – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take from me my life.

A call for justice

**¹⁴But I trust* in you, YHWH;
I say, 'You are my God.'**

**¹⁵My lot is in your hands;
deliver me from the hand of
my enemies who persecute
me.**

**¹⁶Show to your servant your
radiant face; in your kind-
ness* save* me.**

**¹⁷Do not let me be put to
shame, YHWH, for having
called on you; let the wick-
ed be put to shame; let them
go in silence to Sheol.**

**¹⁸Let the lying lips be
stilled that speak insolently
against the just* with pride
and contempt.**

**¹⁹O how abundant is the
goodness that you have
reserved for those who fear*
you, and have dispensed to
those who take refuge in
you, for everyone to see!**

**²⁰In the secret hiding place
of your presence you hide
them from human plots; in
your tent you hold them
safe from contentious
tongues.**

Having listed his ills, the psalmist gives expression to his trust in YHWH. He experiences being in the hands of his enemies, but he knows that through all this he remains in God's hands. His prayer that YHWH will let his face shine upon him, is a frequent theme in the psalms and throughout the Scriptures:

YHWH bless you and keep you;
YHWH make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
YHWH lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary.

– Daniel 9:17

He cries out for justice, for the accusers to be silenced with the ultimate silence of the grave (Sheol). Compare Jeremiah:

Let my persecutors be shamed, but do not let me be shamed; let them be dismayed, but do not let me be dismayed; bring on them the day of disaster; destroy them with double destruction!

– Jeremiah 17:18

He considers himself to be among the 'just', among those who faithfully do God's will.

I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name YHWH; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

– Exodus 33:19

They will celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and will sing aloud of your justice.

– Psalm 145:7

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of YHWH . . . my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 31:12,14

The psalmist knows that God hears him, and he experiences God's saving help.

²¹Blessed* be YHWH, who has shown wonderful kindness* to me in his stronghold.

²²I had said in my alarm, 'I am excluded from your presence.' But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help*.

The psalmist has experienced the response of YHWH to his pleading, and so encourages the community to 'love'[Hebrew 'āḥab, אָהַב] YHWH, that is to say, to remain faithful to the covenant. As one would expect, this is a regular exhortation in the Hebrew Scriptures:

You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

– Deuteronomy 6:5

You shall love YHWH your God, therefore, and keep his charge, his decrees, his ordinances, and his commandments always.

– Deuteronomy 11:1

I love YHWH, because he has heard my voice and my plea.

– Psalm 116:1

I love you YHWH, my strength.

– Psalm 18:1

In this last quotation the Hebrew for love is *rāḥam* [רָחַם], not 'āḥab [אָהַב]. It is the only time this especially intimate word is used for our love for God.

It is for us to 'hope in YHWH'. The response comes when God knows best, which is when we are truly ready.

Hope in YHWH; be strong, and let your heart take courage; hope YHWH!

– Psalm 27:14

Compare Paul:

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

– 1Corinthians 16:13-14

²³Love YHWH, all you his faithful ones. YHWH preserves those who believe in him*, but repays in full the one who acts haughtily.

²⁴Be strong, and let your heart* take courage, all you who hope* in YHWH.