

August 23/24, 2003

Truth vs. Feeling

Psalm 31

Pastor Bryan Clark

When we were in India, one of the unusual things is that they drive on the opposite side of the street. If you've ever encountered that, it is very unnerving, because every instinct you have is wrong. If you're driving down the highway, you just get in the opposite lane and go. But when you are in traffic and you're moving and weaving, and suddenly a car pulls out and you have to react, every instinct you have is backwards. And rather than pulling off to safety, you would just hit head on. If I would have driven, we would have been dead in an hour.

To drive there, you really have to learn how to deny your instinctual responses and learn a whole different way to respond. It reminds me of these stories I've read of fighter pilots, how they have to learn and discipline themselves to read the instruments, because oftentimes what they feel is inaccurate. Sometimes they feel like they are upside down, and they're actually right side up; or they feel like they're right side up and they're upside down. They have to determine whether they are going to believe the instruments or go with their feelings. But the reality is, if at any moment they choose to go with their feelings, they will perish because they are usually wrong.

That seems to me to be a fairly accurate picture of life. We oftentimes struggle between our feelings and emotions and what we need to believe is true with our minds. That is especially true when we are wrestling through the negative emotions, when we are struggling with despair and despondence, and our feelings are telling us one thing. If we start thinking with our feelings, we get ourselves into all kinds of trouble, rather than thinking with our minds and making a choice of our will—in a sense, believing the instrument.

But that raises all kinds of questions. Should we as Christians always be victorious? Shouldn't we always be on top of life? Shouldn't we be living the abundant Christian life? What are we doing in the slough of despair? If we find ourselves struggling with depression and despondency, does that mean that we are failing? Does that mean that we don't believe? Is this a crisis of faith? How do we respond to all of that?

Let's look at Psalm 31 as we try and wrestle with some of those questions. Probably under Psalm 31, your Bible says "a Psalm of David." It is good to know that may or may not be the case. It most likely is, but nobody knows that for sure. This is also a much quoted psalm. It was quoted by Jeremiah the prophet. It was quoted by David in Psalm 71. It was quoted by Jesus as he hung on the cross. In all three of those quotations, the psalm was quoted by people who were in distress, people who were struggling with very difficult circumstances.

The basic structure of the psalm is such that verses 1-22 are really the personal story, the personal testimony, of the psalmist. Verses 23 and 24 are the application. Based on his story, this is what he is saying to the reader in terms of application.

I think it is also true that the application to us that flows out of verses 23 and 24 comes as much out of the structure of the psalm as it does from the content itself. So with that in mind, let's begin.

In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge; Let me never be ashamed. (v. 1 *NASB)

That opening statement sets the tone for this psalm. God is his place of refuge—his safe place. And then the psalm goes through various metaphors and pictures that describe that.

In Your righteousness deliver me. Incline Your ear to me, rescue me quickly... (v. 1b)

Don't read over the word "quickly." There's a sense of urgency where the psalmist is saying, "I need help now—quickly!"

Be to me a rock of strength, a stronghold to save me. For You are my rock and my fortress; for Your name's sake You will lead me and guide me. (v. 2b-3)

The psalmist is saying, as a man of God, it is God's reputation that is at stake. So for His name's sake, He will lead him and guide him.

You will pull me out of the net which they have secretly laid for me, for You are my strength. Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have ransomed me, O LORD, God of truth. (v. 4-5)

Verse 5 is an often quoted verse. It was quoted by Jesus as He hung on the cross; His final words were Psalm 31:5. It has been quoted by a number of Christian martyrs as they died. John Huss was burned at the stake, and the final words out of his mouth were Psalm 31:5. Martin Luther, the writer of the words of the great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, uttered Psalm 31:5 as he died.

Verses 1 through 5 really are a powerful statement of the writer's belief in God as a place of refuge, God as his deliverer, his stronghold, his rock, his strength. Obviously those words were penned from a very godly man who walked with God and believed in God and trusted God. The psalm continues:

I hate those who regard vain idols, but I trust in the LORD. (v. 6)

Whenever you see the word "hate" in either the Old or the New Testament, remember that these are not words of emotion, like we think of them in our language. Rather, they are words of contrast or opposition. What he is saying is, "I hate (or I oppose) everyone who promotes these vain idols." The Hebrew literally says "the vanity of vanity of idols"—meaning total worthlessness. The pieces of stone and wood have no ability to respond to the prayers of those people at all.

We experienced this when we were in India, where they had gods of concrete. They were broken and chipped and cracked, and people by the thousands would come and pray to this hunk of concrete. Their gods have no more ability to answer their prayers than my driveway or my sidewalk. It's just a piece of concrete. And we felt the same way—that those people go to vain idols and pour out their hearts. He contrasts that with what he has with the living God.

But I trust in the LORD. I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness, because You have seen my affliction; You have known the troubles of my soul. (v. 6b-7)

David (or the writer of the psalm) has a God who is alive, in whom he lives in relationship with, and He hears and He responds and He feels and He cares.

And You have not given me over into the hand of the enemy; You have set my feet in a large place. (v. 8)

Again, verses 1 through 8 are words that are very familiar in the psalm. They are not complicated words. They don't take a lot of explanation. They are obviously written by someone who walks with God, who has a relationship with God, who is very godly. That is why verses 9-13 catch us

completely off guard. It is as if the one who has been standing on the rock suddenly steps into quicksand.

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted away from grief, my soul and my body also. (v. 9)

The Hebrew people believed that life was seen in the eyes, so when they would talk about an eye fading away or an eye wasting away, it was the idea that the life is draining away from the eyes of the person. It is a very poetic way of saying, “He is just losing it.” But it is not just his emotions. It affects his body and his soul. Any of you who have struggled with despair and depression know it isn't just an emotional thing, but you are drained of physical energy. You feel like you have nothing left. And that is what he is saying.

For my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing... (v. 10a)

I think it is interesting to note that the psalmist isn't just having a terrible day; he's having some terrible years.

My strength has failed because of my iniquity, and my body has wasted away. (v. 10b)

He says he is more aware of his sin and that just adds to the burden and the pain, and his body is wasted away.

Because of all my adversaries, I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors... (v. 11a)

He has become a reproach. His neighbors do not want to see him; they do not want to be around him.

...and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. (v. 11b)

He says, “My acquaintances dread to see me coming; they go to the other side of the street.” Emotionally he has worn them out; they just don't want to hear it again. He feels all alone.

I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind... (v. 12a)

We would say, “out of sight—out of mind.” It's as if he's died. Everyone is going on with their lives as if he is history, while he suffers.

I am like a broken vessel. (v. 12b)

It's like a broken pot. It's like having a flowerpot that breaks, and you just shove it into the corner of the garage. Everything gets piled on it; it's there, but it's buried. Nobody cares. Nobody wants it.

For I have heard the slander of many, terror is on every side; while they took counsel together against me, they schemed to take away my life. (v. 13)

Who is this guy and where did he come from? And what happened to the one who wrote verses 1 through 8? It almost seems like it is two different people, but it's not. It is one person saying, “This is what I believe; this is the truth upon which I stand, but this is what I'm feeling.” He is in

despair, and he is going through this despondency and talking about his feelings and his struggle. This is really the place, for the psalmist, where his theology intersects with real life.

In J. I. Packer's book, *Knowing God*, in the preface he talks about two groups of people: there are the "balconers" and there are the travelers. The balconers are those people that sit up in the balcony and they don't really travel the pathway of life. They just sit and watch. They have all kinds of theories about the best way to travel the path and better ways to do it, and they are somewhat critical of the travelers. But it is all theory; they don't travel themselves. A lot of preachers and theologians tend to be balconers. But there isn't one writer of the Scriptures who was a balconer. They were all travelers, and the psalmist is certainly a traveler. A traveler is one who isn't dealing with theory and speculation, but survival. They are traveling the pathway of life and trying to understand that which will help them survive. The psalmist is struggling with the reality of his feelings versus what he believes to be true.

You know, it would be a great thing if I could tell you this morning that if you just trust God, if you believe His promises, if you walk in obedience to Him, you will never fall into the pit of despair. But I can't tell you that. It is interesting to go through Hebrews 11, the faith hall of fame, and find these heroes of faith, then go back and read their stories of how many of them struggled with depression, despair, and anguish to the point of almost being incapacitated at times. Abraham... Moses...Elijah...even the apostle Paul. You remember in Philippians, a book that was really written about how to experience joy, Paul was talking about Epaphroditus, and he said if he would have died, that would have been "sorrow upon sorrow," meaning "it would have just pushed me over the edge." He was struggling.

All through history, if you read the stories of the great theologians, preachers, hymn writers, great authors, and great missionaries, you learn that many of them struggled with significant bouts of depression and despair.

Joseph Bayly was a gifted writer and a godly man who knew what it was to feel despair. He lost three of his young sons to death at three different times. He wrote a book called *Psalms of My Life*. This is one of those psalms. He says:

I'm alone, Lord,
Alone
A thousand miles from home.
There is no one here who knows my name
Except the clerk
And he spelled it wrong.
No one to eat dinner with,
Laugh at my jokes,
Listen to my gripes,
Be happy with me about what happened today
And say, "That's great!"
No one cares.

There is just this lousy bed
And slush in the streets outside
Between the buildings.
I feel sorry for myself, and I have plenty of reason to.
Maybe I ought to say, "I'm on top of it! Praise the Lord! Things are great!"
But they're not.
Tonight it's all
Gray slush.

Joseph Bayly, from *Psalms of My Life*

I think sometimes we just get the feeling that if we are really people of faith, if we are really good Christians, we have to “have it together” all the time. We’re always victorious. We’re always on top. No problems! So we just pretend—when sometimes the reality is we feel like it’s just all gray slush.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon is considered to be one of the great preachers, often called the Prince of Preachers. A godly man and great theologian. But he struggled with bouts of depression. In his book, *Lectures to My Students*, he writes:

Fits of depression come over most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous. The wise are not always ready. The brave are not always courageous, and the joyous are not always happy. There may be here and there men of iron... but surely the rust frets even them.

- quote by Spurgeon in the chapter: The Minister’s Fainting Fits,” *Lectures to My Students*

Abraham Lincoln, when he was president of the United States, wrote: “I am the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better.”

- from *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* by Roy Basler.

Many of you have read *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, a book that has been read by hundreds of thousands of people. But there was a four year period in Chambers’ life where he was depressed and lived in such despair he could barely function. In his own words he writes:

“For four years, nothing but the overruling grace of God and the kindness of friends kept me out of an asylum. God used me during those years for the conversion of souls, but I had no conscious communion with Him. The Bible was the dullest, most uninteresting book in existence, and the sense of depravity, the vileness and bad motiveness of my nature was terrific.”

The biographer goes on to say:

While others thought everything was fine in Oswald’s life and spoke of him as a saint, he alone understood the plague of sin in his heart. It was a lonely, undeclared struggle, as much like Jesus’ temptation in the desert as Chambers would ever know.

- David McCasland, *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God*, 1993

We have sung the great old hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” The lyrics of that are so powerful and so victorious, written by a man who struggled with depression and despair his entire life. Martin Luther struggled so much with despair it made him physically ill on a regular basis. It would be a great thing if we could somehow just figure out how to live our Christian life in such a way that we never fall into the slough of despair. But that really isn’t possible; it is part of the journey.

Chuck Swindoll talks about that as he refers to John Bunyun’s classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He says:

The story follows the hero, Christian, on his treacherous journey from the City of Destruction to his heavenly destination, the Celestial City. Along the way, Christian and a companion approach a very miry slough that was in the middle of the plain; and they, being heedless, did both fall suddenly into the bog. The name of the slough was Despond. Here, therefore, they wallowed for a time, being grievously covered in dirt; and Christian, because of the burden that was on his back, began to sink in the mire. His traveling companion manages to get out, but rather than giving Christian a hand up, he turns away from the path of life and flees home. Christian, then, is left struggling alone in the boggy, muddy hole until a man named Help kindly pulls him free from

despondency's pit and sets him on solid ground. Christian asks why this dangerous plot of land has not been "mended, that poor travelers might go" on heaven's journey" with more security"? And Help tellingly replies, "This miry slough is such a place as cannot be mended."

-Chuck Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*

How true this is in real life. No matter how hard we try or how spiritually mature we are, miry sloughs are inevitable, not because we have failed somehow, but because no one is immune to despondency. It is such a place as cannot be mended—only traveled through.

If that is true, then the question arises: What do we do? What do we do when we find ourselves in the slough of despair? Well, the psalmist models that for us. Let's pick it up again in verse 14:

But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD, I say, "You are my God." My times are in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and from those who persecute me. (v. 14-15)

Now, this again sounds like the guy that wrote verses 1 through 8. He is making his declaration. He believes in God. He is making a choice of his will to trust.

Make Your face to shine upon Your servant; Save me in Your lovingkindness. Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I call upon You; Let the wicked be put to shame, let them be silent in Sheol. Let the lying lips be mute, which speak arrogantly against the righteous with pride and contempt. How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You, which You have wrought for those who take refuge in You, before the sons of men! You hide them in the secret place of Your presence from the conspiracies of man; You keep them secretly in a shelter from the strife of tongues. (v. 16-20)

Verses 19 and 20 are very important. The reason the psalmist trusts in God is because he believes in God's goodness. As a matter of fact, he says he believes that God has goodness stored up for him beyond what he has ever experienced, and there is a little bit of that goodness that is displayed before man. You can see the goodness of God in his blessings, but what you see is just a fraction of the goodness God has stored up for those who seek refuge in him by faith. The psalmist believes that, even though it seems to be running contrary to what he is feeling and experiencing.

Blessed be the LORD, for He has made marvelous His lovingkindness to me in a besieged city. As for me, I said in my alarm, "I am cut off from before Your eyes"; Nevertheless You heard the voice of my supplications when I cried to You. (v. 21-22)

The psalmist is saying, "I felt like God had cut me off, but in reality He heard me and He responded." The psalmist has told his own personal story. It is a conflict between what he is feeling and experiencing versus what he chooses to believe is true. Then, in verses 23 and 24 he gives the application to the reader:

O love the LORD, all you His godly ones! The LORD preserves the faithful and fully recompenses the proud doer. Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in the LORD. (v. 23-24)

In the end, the psalmist encourages us to trust in God, to be faithful, to place our hope in Him, even when our feelings tell us otherwise. The reality is, when you find yourself in the slough of despair, you have to make a choice. In that moment, you can choose to think with your feelings and emotions and you will find that slough to be inescapable. Or you can choose to think with your

mind, in an act of your will, and believe that God tells the truth. If you hold on with all you have to these truths, that will eventually get you out the other side.

Sometimes we really don't know what we believe until those beliefs are tested. It is easy to just talk about faith and have a lot of "God talk" and to have the right answers to the right questions. But sometimes we really don't know if we believe that or not until it is tested. Then we have to make a choice: either we believe it or we don't.

You can't learn to swim just by reading books and watching videos. At some point, you do have to get in the water. I've learned this with my horse. I really find myself fascinated by the books, the magazines, the videos, the seminars, and the science of the whole thing. The theory of it is very appealing. But if you are going to train a horse, at some point you have to go from theory to practice if you're really going to believe it. And there is that fateful day when you do have to choose to do what no other person has ever done. That is, you have to saddle up that 800 pound animal that, on any given day, could probably kill you if he wanted to, and you put your foot in the stirrup while your heart is beating through your chest. You take a deep breath and you settle down. At that moment you're either going to get on, or you're going to walk away.

I think that is what the psalmist is saying. The psalmist is saying there comes a point, and it's usually when you are in the pit of despair, when you have to make a choice. You have to decide either: *I believe this and I'm going to put my foot in the stirrup and I'm going to get on; or, I'm going to walk away.*

Oswald Chambers understood that. It was a turning point in his life. Again, in his own words, he describes it:

Those of you who know the experience, know very well how God brings one to the point of utter despair, and I got to the place where I did not care whether everyone knew how bad I was or not. I cared for nothing on earth, saving to get out of my present condition.

At a little meeting during a League of Prayer mission, a well-known lady was asked to take the after-meeting. She did not speak, but set us to prayer, and then sang, "Touch me again, Lord." I felt nothing, but I knew emphatically my time had come, and I rose to my feet. I had no vision of God, only a sheer dogged determination to take God at his word and prove this thing for myself. So I stood up and I said so.

That was bad enough, but what followed was ten times worse. After I had sat down the lady worker, who knew me well, said, "That is very good of our brother. He has spoken like that as an example to the rest of you." I got up again and I said, "I got up for no one's sake; I got up for my own sake. Either Christianity is a downright fraud, or I have got to get hold of the right end of the stick." And then and there I claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit in a dogged commitment based on Luke 11:13.

I had no vision of angels or heaven; I had nothing. I was as dry and empty as ever—no power or realization of God, no witness of the Holy Spirit. Two days later I was asked to speak at a meeting, and 40 souls came to the front. Did I praise God? No, I was terrified. I left them to the workers and went to Mr. MacGregor and told him what had happened. He said, "Don't you remember claiming the Holy Spirit as a gift based on the words of Jesus, and that Jesus said, "You shall receive power..."? This is that power.

- words of Oswald Chambers in David McCasland's book, *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God*, 1993

Chamber goes on to write that was a pivotal moment in his life when he chose to believe. It was

contrary to what he was feeling. It was contrary to where he was at emotionally. It was contrary to his experiences. But he simply chose to believe that God tells the truth.

If you find yourself sinking in the slough of despair, it doesn't mean you are a bad Christian. It doesn't mean you've lost your faith. It doesn't mean everything is coming apart. But it does mean that at that moment you have a choice to make. If at that moment you choose to think with your feelings, you will remain in that slough. But if you choose to think with your mind in an act of your will contrary to what you are feeling, you are going to read the instruments and you are going to believe them. Then you hang on for all your worth, and God will bring you out the other side.

Our Father, we are thankful that Your Word is so real. The heroes of faith were not perfect men and women who never struggled. Lord, they were men and women like the psalmist who, at times, found themselves in the pit of despair. Lord, in those moments, may we be like the psalmist and, in an act of our will, choose to believe what seems to run contrary to what we are feeling and what we are experiencing at the time. Lord, give us the courage and the strength to hang on, that you will deliver us out the other side of the slough that we may continue our journey. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2003 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.