

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE REMEDY FOR STRESS

Psalm 31

By

Steven J. Cole

February 15, 2009

© Steven J. Cole, 2009

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

February 15, 2009
Psalms 2008-09, Lesson 8

The Remedy for Stress Psalm 31

As I said last week, if you want to pick one word to describe our modern culture, that word would probably be *pressure*. We have stress management classes, as well as many books and articles aimed at helping us reduce stress. You can take classes on meditation and yoga at most community centers. Even many Christians ignore the spiritual dangers of these methods and claim that they help them to cope with stress. Some take tranquilizers or turn to illegal drugs or alcohol. But precious few turn to the living God and take refuge in Him! If you dare to suggest that someone under stress trust in God, you will often be met with scorn, even by fellow Christians.

Try this for a stressful situation: a group of enemies have conspired together to kill you. They have instigated a widespread campaign of slander and lies. As a result, your name has become a reproach, even among your neighbors and former friends. When they see you coming, they turn and run the other way. They fear being identified in any way with you, because they figure that your time is short. They don't want to be implicated by association.

As a result of these problems, you're struggling with depression. You also realize that many of your troubles stem from your own sin. So on top of everything else, you're wrestling with guilt. The whole experience has taken its toll on your health. You don't have strength to do your daily tasks. Your body is wasting away. Wherever you look, it seems that terror is staring you in the face.

This is how David describes his situation in Psalm 31. We can't be certain of the exact situation that lies behind this psalm. Many think that because David mentions being rescued from a besieged city (v. 21), it was when the residents of Keilah conspired to hand David over to Saul, who was trying to kill him (1 Sam. 23:7-14). But in light of David's reference to his own sin (v. 10), I'm inclined to agree with Spurgeon that David wrote this psalm in connection with Absalom's rebellion.

Perhaps we're not told specifically when it was so that we can apply it to our own stressful situations, whatever the causes. Whatever the exact circumstances, we know that this psalm is not coming to us out of the ivory tower of a poet who was insulated from life's pressures. Rather, it comes from a man who despaired of life itself. The psalm gives us a guaranteed, simple (but not simplistic) remedy for stress:

The remedy for stress is to trust in
the sovereign, personal Lord.

My prayer is that the Lord helps us to see that trusting in Him, the living, sovereign, personal God, is the most practical, time-proven way to deal with stress in this world.

1. Stress is a fact of life, especially for the godly.

Somehow, we have gotten the crazy notion that if we follow and obey the Lord, He will protect us from difficult trials. But the Bible repeatedly shows that it is often *because* you follow the Lord that you encounter various trials. If you blend in with the world, they don't bother you. But the fact that you follow Christ makes you the special target. Jesus explained this very plainly (John 15:19), "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you." Note four things:

A. Stress produces a gamut of emotions, even in the most godly of people.

We need to understand that trusting in the Lord does not insulate us from the roller coaster of emotions that hit when we face stressful situations. Some spiritual life books make it sound as though when you discover the secret of resting in the Lord, you will be perfectly calm in the midst of the worst of trials. To the extent that your emotions go up or down the roller coaster, you must be lacking in your spiritual life.

But look at David's emotions in the psalm. Remember, he was not a spiritual novice at this point. He was a man after God's own heart. First, he was feeling shame, as implied by his repeated prayer that he will not be ashamed (vv. 1, 17). Perhaps his enemies were accusing him of being a hypocrite: "He claims to trust in God, but look at what he did with Bathsheba and her husband! Look at his

family life—it's a complete shambles! Ha! Some 'man of God' he is!" Coupled closely with shame was David's own guilt, as he acknowledges his iniquity as a part of his current troubles (v. 10).

Also, David was afraid. He states that "terror is on every side" (v. 13). You can hear the panic in his voice as he cries out to God to rescue him quickly and pull him out of the net (vv. 2, 4). He states that he is in distress (v. 9). He is overwhelmed with sorrow, sighing, and grief (vv. 9, 10). These emotions are so strong that they are affecting him physically, making him waste away. He is feeling rejected, even by his former friends (v. 11). He feels as useless as a broken vessel (v. 12).

But, everything is not down for David. He also experiences some highs. He is rejoicing and glad in the Lord's lovingkindness (v. 7). He bursts forth in praise because of God's great goodness that He has stored up for those who fear Him (v. 19). He blesses the Lord because He has made marvelous His lovingkindness to David even while he was under siege (v. 21). In a final burst of praise, he exhorts all of God's saints to love Him, be strong, take courage, and hope in Him (vv. 23-24). Derek Kidner (*Psalms 1-72* [IVP], p. 130) notes the unusual feature of this psalm, that it makes the journey from anguish to assurance twice over: once in verses 1-8 and then again in 9-24.

In other words, this psalm is very true to life. David gains the victory, but then the waves of distress sweep over him and he plunges again into despair. Then he gains the victory again. This means that it is very normal, even for the most godly of saints, to feel a gamut of emotions in the midst of severe trials. The key is not to be passive in letting your emotions keep you down. You've got to wrestle to process your emotions and gain the victory in the Lord. That's why the psalms are so helpful. The psalmist is often in despair at the beginning of the psalm, but he takes you through the process of fighting his way into the clear with the Lord, even if his circumstances haven't changed at all (see, also 2 Cor. 1:8-11).

B. The time to prepare for stress is before it hits.

Psalm 31 makes it clear that David knew God in a personal, practical, and deep way *before* he got into this crisis. Note the many attributes of God that David recites throughout the psalm: God is

a refuge and shelter (vv. 1, 19, 20). He is righteous (v. 1) and will judge righteously (v. 23). He is a rock of strength (vv. 2, 3). He hears and answers prayer (vv. 2, 22). He is a stronghold and fortress (vv. 2, 3), David's source of strength (v. 4). He is the God of truth (v. 5) and of lovingkindness (vv. 7, 16, 21). He is all-knowing (v. 7) and gracious (v. 9), in that He forgives and doesn't cast off the rejected (implied in vv. 9-13). He has unlimited storehouses of goodness for those who fear Him (v. 19), even if they are going through the worst of trials.

David didn't learn all of that about God suddenly in the middle of this calamity, although he no doubt deepened his knowledge of God through this distress. David had begun to know God through His Word (Ps. 19) as a boy tending his father's sheep. So when this crisis hit, David had resources in God to lean on.

If you're not in a crisis, take the time to sink down roots in the Lord that will enable you to weather the inevitable storms that will come. Spend time alone with God and His Word, feeding your soul. Let His Word confront your life with sin that needs to be dealt with. Then you'll be ready for stressful times.

If you're already in a crisis and you don't know God as David did, seek Him like you never have before! He is gracious and may meet you there, if your heart is right. But the time to prepare for stress is before it hits.

C. Even if your stress is the result of sin, you can take refuge in God.

We saw this also in Psalm 25. Here (31:10), David recognizes that, in part, his own sin was behind the crisis he was in. As I said, this leads me to think that the psalm was written in connection with Absalom's rebellion. God will forgive our sin if we confess and forsake it (Prov. 28:13), but He doesn't necessarily remove the consequences (Gal. 6:7-8). But David's experience shows that even if our calamity is the direct result of our sin, we can still run to God for refuge and know that He will receive us!

It's significant that David's enemies were still condemning him long 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 know the sincerity of David's repentance or the magnitude of God's grace.

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 righteousness He often 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.

D. God will never let us go through more stress than we can bear if we trust in Him.

"God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted [or, 'tried'] beyond what you are able" (1 Cor. 10:13)! Though David's trial was terrifying, so that he despaired even of life itself (v. 13), God gave him strength to endure. God isn't into easy solutions. He doesn't usually remove the trial the instant we seek Him. But none who have waited on Him have found Him to fail. "He gives more grace when the burdens grow greater!"

It's only when we trust God in the midst of severe distress that we prove His faithfulness in our own experience. Often it's the waiting for God to deliver us that's the most difficult thing. Think of Joseph, languishing for the better part of his twenties in the dark Egyptian dungeon, his feet in irons. Why? Because he obeyed the Lord by resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife! Why didn't God answer his prayers sooner? We know the outcome, but for years, Joseph didn't know that one day he would be released from prison and promoted to second in the land. But because Joseph trusted in God, he could later say to his brothers, "You meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

So recognize that stress is a fact of life, *especially* for the godly. We don't get a free pass, but here's what we do get:

2. The sovereign, personal God is a rock of refuge to the godly who are under intense stress.

We've already seen the many attributes of God that David enumerates in this psalm. But notice again how repetitive he is in the opening verses about God's being a rock of refuge. First, David affirms that he has taken refuge in God (v. 1). Then he asks God to

be to him a rock of strength, a stronghold to save him (v. 2). Then, he affirms again that God is his rock and fortress (v. 3). He adds one more time (v. 4) that God is his strength. Then, later in the psalm he changes the place of refuge from the rock to the secret place of God's presence (v. 20). But the idea is the same, that God, the Almighty Sovereign of the universe, is a personal shelter for His oppressed people.

David affirms God's sovereignty over all when he says (v. 15), "My times are in Your hand." Daniel 2:21 uses this same Hebrew word for "times": "It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings...." Our God is not sitting on the edge of heaven, biting His nails as He sees the rebellion of the human race unfold. No one can thwart His purpose (Job 42:2).

God has a sovereign plan for all of history. He is working all times and epochs, as well as *our times*, after the counsel of His will, for our ultimate good (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 8:28). We can know that when tragedy hits us, God was not asleep or on vacation. His sovereignty is a great comfort in a time of trial. We can know that He has designed our distressing situation to teach us more about what it means to take refuge in Him.

But God is not only the Sovereign of the universe, unapproachable in His splendor and might. He is also the personal God who knows and cares about every detail of our situation. This entire psalm is personal and intimate, but note especially v. 14: "But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord, I say, 'You are my God.'" And it is not just that David knows God personally, but also God knows David personally (v. 7), "I will rejoice and be glad in Your loving-kindness, because You have seen my affliction; you have known the troubles of my soul." Although David's acquaintances had forgotten him (v. 12), he knew that God had not forgotten him.

In a time of trial, Satan tempts us to doubt either God's sovereignty or His personal love and care for us. David confesses (v. 22), "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." Peter wrote to a suffering church, some of whose members were suffering martyrdom. He exhorted them to cast all their anxiety on God, adding (1 Pet. 5:7b), "because He cares for you." Then, after warning them that the devil was seeking to de-

your them through their trials, he writes (1 Pet. 5:9-11), "But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen."

You may be thinking at this point, "Well, then, if God is sovereign and if my times are in His hands, then there's nothing left for me to do. Whatever will be, will be." Not so! There is a third element. Stress is a fact of life, especially for the godly. The sovereign, personal God is a rock of refuge for us in stress. Also,

3. We must actively trust in the sovereign, personal God repeatedly during our times of stress.

David is determined to trust God during his stressful times, but it isn't automatic. The psalm is full of repeated affirmations of trust in God. David begins, "In You, O Lord, I have taken refuge...." Okay, sounds like a done deal! But in verse 2 he cries, "Be to me a rock of strength." He goes on to affirm that God *is* his rock and fortress, but he is fighting for God to be that rock of strength *for him*. Then again in verse 5, David commits his spirit (i.e., his life) into God's hand. In verse 6, he affirms again his trust in the Lord. Then he plunges again into the depths of despair (vv. 8-13), only to emerge again in verse 14 with the strong affirmation, "But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord. I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hand." The whole psalm is this repeated fight for faith in God in the midst of this severe trial.

Maybe you're thinking, "What else can a believer do than trust God in a time of trial?" But it's not automatic, as I said. Seemingly out of nowhere, David exclaims (v. 6), "I hate those who regard vain idols, but I trust in the Lord." Why does he say that there? I think it's because many, even many of those who in the good times profess to follow God, turn to vain idols or worldly "solutions" when trials hit. Calvin observed this in his day. He wrote, (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Psalms, p. 502), "It is marvelous [incredible], that, although many things distress us all, scarcely one in a hundred is so wise as to commit his life into God's hand."

I once had a couple coming to my church in California who had dropped out. When I saw the husband, he told me that they were going to a Science of Mind group, because his wife had back pain and when she went there, her pain got better. I gently told him that the group was a false cult. He angrily flashed at me, "Look, if my wife is in pain and she gets relief from pain there, that's where we're going." I never saw them again. I've seen many others who turn to worldly psychology, rather than to God and His Word, for supposed answers to their problems. It's as if God had not given us His remedy for stress and other problems. His remedy is to trust in Him as the sovereign, personal Lord. Finally,

4. Our trust in God should overflow into exuberant praise.

In verse 19, David erupts, "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!" Again, in verse 21, "Blessed be the Lord, ..." Verse 23, "O love the Lord, all you His godly ones!" Verse 24, "Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in the Lord."

David's exuberant praise does not mean that his battles are over. In fact, there is no indication that his circumstances have changed at all. Rather, David has found strength in the battle as by faith he has taken refuge in the Lord. With regard to David's final exhortation to be strong and take courage, Calvin realistically notes (*ibid.*, pp. 520-521),

Nor is his exhortation to courage and firmness unnecessary; because, when any one begins to rely on God, he must ... arm himself for sustaining many assaults from Satan. We are first, then, calmly to commit ourselves to the protection and guardianship of God, and to endeavor to have the experience of his goodness pervading our whole minds. Secondly, thus furnished with steady firmness and unflinching strength, we are to stand prepared to sustain every day new conflicts.

Conclusion

It's interesting that Jonah echoed a phrase from this psalm when he cried out to the Lord from the belly of the great fish (Jon. 2:8; Ps. 31:6a). Jeremiah, whose message was rejected and whose life was often threatened, often borrowed another phrase from the

psalm as his motto (Jer. 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29; Lam. 2:22; Ps. 31:13). As an old man, the author of Psalm 71 (perhaps David himself), took refuge in God by praying the words of Psalm 31:1-3. But most significantly, the Lord Jesus had meditated on this psalm so often that His final words from the cross were a quote from Psalm 31:5: "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). He endured the supreme stress of bearing our sins by entrusting Himself to the sovereign, personal God! So must we!

How are you coping with the stress in your life? Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China who endured many pressures including narrow escapes from death, used to say, "It doesn't matter, really, how great the pressure is; it only matters *where the pressure lies*. See that it never comes *between* you and the Lord—then, the greater the pressure, the more it presses you to His breast" (Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* [Moody Press], p. 152). God's remedy for stress is for us trust in Him, the sovereign, personal Lord.

Application Questions

1. Is God's sovereignty a source of comfort or consternation to you? Why?
2. How can a person who lacks faith in God increase in faith?
3. Agree/disagree: Being "stressed out" is evidence of a lack of trust in God?
4. Is it true that God will never give us more stress than we can bear? What are the implications of this?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2009, All Rights Reserved.