

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Psalm 31

If we learn anything from the Psalms it's that it's OK, in fact, highly encouraged, to be honest, raw, candid, unfiltered with God...and with ourselves. I think one of the bigger challenges we face is being honest with ourselves about ourselves. We are all masters of self-deception, and that keeps us from being truly healthy.

What we see in Psalm 31 is someone (David in this case) who is brutally honest with his feelings, and then in sharing his feelings with God. Whatever David may have been experiencing that brought on these feelings, he was all the healthier for it by taking it to God.

The world we live in doesn't really know what to do with negative feelings. We find it challenging to acknowledge that we have them. We express them (often unconsciously) in unhelpful/unhealthy ways. It affects our relationships. It affects our whole outlook on life.

Now please don't misunderstand me. Feelings aren't bad. It is very unhealthy to deny or repress our feelings. BUT, we need to be honest with/about them. We need to identify them, analyze them, and figure out what to do with them. This is best done with God. (HINT...everything is best done WITH God).

- Q. How "in tune" are you with your emotions/feelings? (Explain or give an example.)**
- Q. Do you have a preferred way of expressing your emotions/feelings? (Or if not "preferred", perhaps a "predominate" way? If you're not sure, it's likely that those who know you well can clue you in.)**
- Q. What/how are you feeling right now? (Or, what has been the predominate feeling you've been experiencing this past week?)**

For some perspective on our feelings and the role they play in our lives, please allow me to share some thoughts from Dallas Willard, found in his book *Renovation of the Heart*.

Feelings are a primary blessing and a primary problem for human life. We cannot live without them and we can hardly live with them. Hence, they are also central for spiritual formation in the Christian tradition. In the restoration of the individual to God, feelings too must be renovated: old ones removed in many cases, or at least thoroughly modified, and new ones installed or at least heightened into a new prominence...

It is part of divine and human wisdom to realize that feelings are central to our existence and to make sure they are good feelings. And, indeed, they can be strong, healthy ones. We do not have to be victimized by destructive feelings. Even the feelings that harm us are, for the most part, not bad in themselves, but are somehow not properly limited or subordinated. They are out of order. Feelings are, with a few exceptions, good servants. But they are disastrous masters...

And just as thought and feeling are inseparable, so volition (will) is closely intertwined with them. To choose, one must have some object or concept before the mind and some feeling for or against it. There is no choice that does not involve both thought and feeling. On the other hand, what we feel and think is (or can and should be) to a very large degree a matter of choice in competent adult persons, who will be very careful about what they allow their mind to dwell upon or what they allow themselves to feel. This is crucial to the practical methods of spiritual formation.

As we approach Psalm 31 we quickly notice that the psalmist is in some sort of trouble/distress. He is crying out for refuge and rescue (vss. 1-2). But notice how his confidence in the Lord surpasses his concern for his situation. He looks to God as his rock of refuge, his strong fortress, and with an expectation that God will come through for him...so much so that he states, "*Into Your hands I commit my spirit...*" (vs 5) If these words sound familiar, there's a reason for that. These are the words Jesus said to the Father as He hung on the cross, just before dying. (Luke 23:46).

Notice verse 3, "*for the sake of Your name lead and guide me.*" David's appeal for God's help wasn't simply a cry to improve his situation. He recognized that something greater than himself and his circumstances were at stake. His trouble/distress was an opportunity for God to be glorified. While it's certainly one of the most challenging things we can do, seeing our problems/troubles as an opportunity for God to be honored/glorified is the best possible (and most mature) way of seeing things. (But, again, that's easier said than done.) But sometimes simply wanting to want the right thing is a good first step.

Q. As you consider your motives for the various things you do or don't do, would you say that are for the sake of your name or God's name? Explain.

What we see throughout this psalm is the tension between trying to see the higher, objective view of the situation/circumstances on one hand, with the pain and misery of the personal, subjective experience of it on the other. Notice the rhythm, the ebb and flow of this psalm, between the psalmist's distress, and his faith in God. We see it well in verses 9-13, contrasted with 14-20. Observe the words used: *distress, sorrow, grief, anguish, groaning, contempt, dread, forgotten, broken, slander, terror, conspire* (vss. 9-13). Now contrast that with the words used in 14-20: *trust, deliver, shine, unfailing, goodness, refuge, shelter, wonderful*. (NIV) These beautifully descriptive words (be it the negative ones or the positive ones) are communicated expressions of deep and real emotions and experience...thus, the stuff of poetry.

But there's something contextual here that's easy to miss. Notice the word "shame" in verses 1 and 17. The ancient near east (the people, places, and times of the Bible) were shame and honor societies. (Well, actually, all times, places, people are shame/honor societies, it just plays out differently in different places, times, cultures.) In the Bible we see the idea/theme of shame (or being ashamed) prevalently. Like physical pain, the emotional/psychological pain of shame was to be avoided...maybe even more so than physical pain. But regardless of the type of pain, trouble, or distress the Bible is consistent that God is the one we are to turn to for refuge.

Shame typically has to do with what people think of us. Ultimately, it's what God thinks of us that matters most.

- Q. As you consider the type of pain you've experienced in your life, would you categorize it more as physical, emotional, relational, psychological, etc.? If you're comfortable, share some examples.**
- Q. Describe a time when you've questioned God's goodness toward you due to the challenges you were facing. Can you put some descriptive words to that experience?**
- Q. What words, phrases, lines describe the psalmist's personal experience (pain, trouble)? What words, phrases, lines describe the bigger picture (or his faith) that the psalmist is trying to cling to?**
- Q. One of the ways the psalmist articulates his prayer regarding his predicament is in verse 4, "Free me from the trap that is set for me..." Share about a time when you felt trapped.**

Notice also that though most of the psalm is from the personal/individual perspective, it ends with a communal perspective by calling all God's people to trust and hope in Him.

- Q. When you face tough times do you tend to isolate yourself from others or pursue the help of others? Perhaps give an example.**

Our situations/circumstances don't define us. Our feelings don't define us. (Though both are very real.) God defines us. But it's nevertheless important for us to be honest about how/what we feel (about our circumstances, our relationships, about life, about God) and take all of that to God. We can't be in perfect submission/surrender to Him, if we're holding back our feelings...even the negative ones. (And surrender/submission to Him is the safest place for us to be.)

Once we can honestly identify and acknowledge our feelings (and perhaps the thoughts, ideas, expectations that undergird them) we can then offer those to God (even if it's anger, frustration, disappointment with God). This level of heart honesty is true worship. Worship doesn't have to be pretty or packaged nicely. Similarly, true discipleship isn't simply knowing "right" things about God (or simple intellectual ascent), but rather relating with Him in an open, honest, personal way.

Verse 22 is a good example of how it's easy to lose perspective in the midst of tough times; "*In my alarm I said, 'I am cut off from Your sight!'*" (Which is probably exactly what it FELT like.) But then the truth triumphs, "*Yet You heard my cry for mercy when I called to You for help.*" (This is the REALITY/TRUTH of the matter.) This demonstrates how our feelings can affect our perception of reality. While our feelings are real, they don't always interpret reality clearly. (The same can be said of our thoughts.)

- Q. The psalmist uses his personal pain to point people to God. How have you used your pain, trouble, challenges, etc. to point people to God?**
- Q. As you read and reflect on this psalm, can you relate to the feelings/experiences the psalmist described? (Be it the negative one or positive ones.)**