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## A Reflection on Psalm 31

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### **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The Book of Psalms encompasses a variety of themes and perspectives that reflect as well as transcend historical and cultural contexts. These writings are categorized by scholars with multiple labels, ranging from Psalms of Lament to Psalms of Praise. One such category, similar in some ways to Psalms of Lament, are Penitential Psalms. With its appeal to repentance and forgiveness, Psalm 31 falls under this category."



*Katie Kreutter (2009)*

## **A Reflection on Psalm 31**

The Book of Psalms encompasses a variety of themes and perspectives that reflect as well as transcend historical and cultural contexts. These writings are categorized by scholars with multiple labels, ranging from Psalms of Lament to Psalms of Praise. One such category, similar in some ways to Psalms of Lament, are the **Penitential Psalms**. With its appeals to repentance and forgiveness, Psalm 31 falls under this category. Interesting to note, the number of this Psalm may vary slightly depending on which English translation is used due to distinctions in verse naming in ancient editions.<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this essay, the New Revised Standard Version will be utilized for a brief consideration of the Psalm and commentary surrounding it.

In St. John Fisher's *Commentary on the Penitential Psalms*, he writes this regarding Psalm 31: "It is great praise to them whose sins be done away by penance to be called blessed. And truly there is no other thing in this world that may so speed-fully cause any creature to be blessed, as purging of sin by penance."<sup>2</sup> While the author of Psalm 31, identified in Scripture as David, does not appear to expressly repent or do penance before God in the passage, it is clear David is praising God for God's faithfulness and steadfast love and calling for followers of God to remain faithful, with the implication that this would include a right response from God's character. Some beliefs

within Christianity emphasize the sinfulness of humankind and God's judgment for this sinful nature. In this passage and resulting commentary, however, both David and St. John Fisher seem to emphasize God's grace and forgiving nature as a cleansing and uplifting gift to be received and responded to not with a spirit of fear in the traditional

sense of the word but with a spirit of love towards God. In this way, this Penitential Psalm varies quite considerably from a Psalm of Lament, which typically focuses on a sense of emptiness, the author feeling distant from God or forsaken, and it may even question the nature or character of God.

Psalm 31 is full of descriptive language in reference to God that reinforces the concept of God as forgiving, such as "refuge," "redeemed," "steadfast love," and "goodness." That is not to say that there is not lamenting language in the passage as well, yet this seems to be in respect to perceived enemies and threats apart from God with a sense of trust that God will prevail in the midst of a time of "distress" and anguish, as is described in verse 9. From David's perspective, this particularly seems to be in relation to those who are upright before God, as David describes himself as God's "servant" and calls upon God's loving nature for redemption in verse 16.

Similarly, while there is a reference to David feeling apart from God when he felt "beset as a city under siege," as verse 21 decries, this is again immediately followed by an assertion that God responded and was present during this time. As mentioned earlier, there is not a description of fear of God in the sense of terror or fright described in Psalm 31. There is, however, a call from David to "fear" God in the sense of reverence and obedience, as in verse 19 the term is referenced and David seems to imply that God's goodness is prevalent in the lives of those who follow God. The Psalm ends with encouragement for those who would hear or, later in history, read the verses that they

should not despair but love God and be upheld with strength and courage by a God who sustains and redeems. There is an appeal to right living as well, with a declaration that haughtiness is not a fruitful response to God's presence, and one that God will "repay," as verse 23 specifies. This may be the singular reference to the somewhat common theme of God as Judge in this particular biblical passage.

As is prevalent within so much of Scripture, Psalm 31 contains much relevance and significance to today. The distress experienced by David, a leader during a time of sociopolitical unrest, is quite similar to today's context. While contemporary Western culture is perceivably more individualistic than biblical times, it is evident discord and strife remain in people's lives for a variety of reasons. During difficult times, people of faith tend to respond in different ways, some of which are reflected in Psalm 31, and others that might be better reflected by a more traditional Psalm of Lament.

An emphasis on repentance and responding to God's forgiveness and love seems to be less apparent within greater society within a postmodern environment. Dissimilarly, in some Christian faith communities a need for forgiveness is stressed so fervently and in such a way that people may begin to experience a sense of guilt or shame and at times feel unworthy towards God and lack a spiritually healthy outlet for penance. The author of this essay believes that Psalm 31 offers an alternative perspective to both of these environments, with emphasis on a penitential response to God's forgiving nature and also descriptions of a loving, compassionate, and redeeming God. These reminders remain quite pertinent as the 21st century begins to take shape and reflect St. John Fisher's exclamation of the blessedness of God's forgiveness received by repentance and resulting penance in one's life.