

Psalmist perspective on anxiety

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[0 : 0 0] Well good morning everyone, it's great to be here. As Neil has already introduced me three times, I want to introduce myself. We're in an area called the Merkinch in South Keswick, which is just 10 minutes outside the city centre of Inverness.

It's a scheme which is a place of high crime, high social issues, but normally has a great sense of community. They're normally close-knit, will help one another out. So myself and my wife started planting there 18 months ago.

Initially it was five people and then it went down to three, and then it went up to four and then down to three again. This year we're up to eight on our launch group, so this is like speaking at a conference. I'm like, wow, so many people.

But we're just so thankful, as the same here for God's faithfulness to us. Because it's a miracle that God used Neil McMillan to plant this church, isn't it? Let's be honest.

Broken people that God uses for His glory, and it's such a marvel. I loved my time here, learning from you guys, making some stupid mistakes.

[1 : 1 0] I loved learning from Neil and Laird, guys who shepherd me well. I'll never forget Neil calling me a reform nut job, was one of the best bits of feedbacks I had from him.

But we in the Americans are trying to plant a church, and I often get asked, what does that look like? And I often reply, it's like what Neil McMillan does in Edinburgh, but I do it with a smile.

That's why I respond, a big smile. So, on this birthday service, you may think I've picked a weird text to talk about, because it's not about a celebration, it's not about a party.

But this psalm has something really important to teach us, because I want to use this psalm to look at the psalmist's perspective on anxiety. Because anxiousness and anxiety is something that affects us all.

As Neil's already said, we live in a time of high mental ill health, where we feel a lot of pressure pushing in us. And that has an effect on the life of the church as well.

[2 : 1 1] It hinders us to share our faith, because we're so nervous and inward. It hinders us to really get involved in community, because we think, if someone really knew me, they would see I'm just a bundle of nerves.

So, it's a really important topic for us to look at. And we're going to look at it from Psalm 31. So, just if you could turn with me either to page 7 or page 9.

And we're just going to look at this psalm together this morning. And just a little bit of context. As we see at the start in the bold, it says, A Psalm of David. Now, we know this psalm was written around the time when the first king of Israel, Saul, was so jealous of David, that his jealousy drove him to try and destroy David.

He was consumed with that. So, in this psalm, we have a lot of a theme like fleeing, like being in a city that's besieged. Like we just get the sense that David's on the run. And this broke David's heart because he actually loved Saul.

And he loved Saul's son, Jonathan, like a dear brother. So, this psalm was written from a soul that is hurting. That is feeling persecuted and pursued, alone, and has this estranged relationship.

[3 : 2 6] And understanding this context, the historical context, helps us understand a wee bit more the poetic language of the psalm. Because that's what psalms are. They're a piece of poetry.

They're to be sung. And there's a subtle theme of anxiety throughout this psalm, Psalm 31, that we're going to look at this morning. And I'm sure we have all had times of anxiousness in our lives. And in our world, it's ever an increasing feeling, especially in our political time. Will Brexit actually happen or not?

Like what's going on? Will my house be worth more or less? Our economy, is it going to be down the drain, as some people say? Is it actually the end of the world as we know it? And let's not add on top of that, our own situations, our health, our jobs, our family life.

And suddenly we can realize, man, there is a lot to be anxious about in life. Like we live in a generation that even a tweet on Twitter can bring that feeling.

[4 : 32] Or an email from your boss or colleague can set off this very vicious emotion. So how do we deal with that? That's kind of where we're at. Well, what do we do when we feel this?

So most secular counselors would say you need to look inward and clear out the rubbish. But if you're like me and you look inward, you panic even more. Because you see how you're just not up to the task.

What we have here is a great help for us. And it's a Christian truth that the Psalmist, David here, lifts his perspective off himself and onto the character of God.

And that helps him in his time of anxiety. So that's really my two points this morning. What's happening to David? What's his reality? The Psalmist's reality. And then his perspective. What's the Psalmist's perspective here?

So we can read this Psalm quite quickly and understand that David's in some bit of trouble. In verse 4, it says he feels trapped. Verses 8 and 11, his enemies are around him, you know, like circling lions.

[5 : 39] In verse 9, he cries out in distress. In distress. Verse 10, his own strength is failing. He's becoming weak and drained. Verse 11, his neighbors don't like him.

I think some of us can relate with that. His friends are full of dread when he comes near. They don't want to be around him. He feels forgotten.

Verse 12, people gossip. Verse 13, he is being pursued. Verse 15, verse 1, he is full of shame. Verse 7, he feels afflicted.

And then his deep anguish and sorrow here. Verses 7 and 9, he talks about that. But then the apex of that is verse 12. Where he says he feels forgotten.

As though he was dead. He feels like a broken vessel. His reality is a complex mix of situational stress.

[6 : 36] Like being in a besieged city. I think that would be pretty scary. And emotional stress. Like feeling shame, abandonment, hurt to the deepest level in a relationship.

And these two elements implode in on themselves. And bring anxiety. And panic. And fear. And many of us here this morning, I'm sure, sit with a heightened level of anxiety.

That where a situational stress has hit you and an emotional stress. And you just are wrestling in yourself right now. And you don't actually know what to do. Maybe you feel like David here in the past few weeks.

You feel trapped. You just feel like there's no way out of this situation. Maybe you feel like your neighbors hate you. And people are gossiping about you. Maybe that's pushing in unusual and making you anxious.

I know I can relate to more than one on this list. Or more one of David's situations in this Psalm 31. And he brings it home powerfully in verse 12.

[7 : 38] Where he says, I am forgotten as low I were dead. I have become like broken pottery. He feels forgotten. And what do we forget as human beings? Generally we forget something that's worthless, don't you?

You don't forget when you park a Lamborghini. That's for sure. You just don't. That never happens. But sometimes you forget where you put the house keys down. Because it's not that important to you.

And what David's saying here is, I feel forgotten. I'm good for nothing. And he links the word forgotten to death. Might as well be dead. No one cares. David feels so alone and isolated in his anxiety.

That he feels forgotten. And we get a wee bit more of an emotional insight to David in verse 22. Where he cries out. So he was in a city and he shouts out in verse 22. In my alarm, I cried out, I'm cut off from your sight.

And this cut off language is the term of a gardener. It's like kind of gardener term. Like you know, you go out the back garden, you cut off the dead bits of your plants.

[8 : 44] That's what he feels like. Dead. Forgotten. Alone. A good for nothing. And I meet many people in my community. In the American church in South Keswick, people call it the fairy.

That feel like this type of worthlessness. That actually consider death as a better alternative. Because they feel cut off from everyone. They feel that no one can understand their pain, their anxiety.

They just feel completely alone. So without God, what do they do? Well, they turn to drugs, drink, sleeping around, bad relationships to try and numb the pain.

To try and control their situation. To try and make them feel better. When actually they're deeply unhappy and anxious. And we all have bad ways of dealing with anxiety too.

We all have things that we run to as crutches. The psalmist's anxiety makes him feel like a broken vessel. Verse 12. Not only does he feel trapped, forgotten, like death.

[9 : 51] People are gossiping. But he feels like a broken vessel. And that's like, you know, we don't keep that around. If you've got a glass in your cupboard, it's leaking. You throw it out, don't you? It's a broken vessel.

Can't do what it's meant to do. David realizes that now in his anxiety, he can't worship the Lord as he should. Because he feels broken. And he cries out to the Lord.

And we get such an insight into David's anxiety in verse 13. That it says, Even a whisper sets off terror on every sight. It's quite powerful imagery, isn't it?

The softest sound a human can make. Brings terror on every sight. Because he's so anxious at this point. He's so full of looking inwards.

And his own emotions are such a turmoil. So if a whisper can set off David's anxiety, an email from an employee, that ding, can surely set off our anxiety, can it?

[10 : 54] Or a tweet. I know that sets off my anxiety sometimes. Something just so small and insignificant has such a big reaction to us. And I hope we're beginning to see how this lifestyle, where whispers, tweets, and emails bring that level of emotion, is draining.

And many of us in church, and in our communities around churches, live with this feeling consistently and constantly. And what's the first victim?

What's the first victim to us if we live life like this? It's joy. We lose joy in our family. We lose joy in our work. We lose joy in church. We slowly become an introvert.

We pull away from the church life, from mission, from praying together. And we become alone. And it feeds even more into our anxiety. And we live in this kind of worst case scenario.

You know, like the worst things would always happen if we actually went out and met that person for a coffee. Ed Welsh in his book, and I would highly recommend it, *Running Scared*, says this.

[12 : 04] Anxious people know they are needy, but their instincts are to worry their way through doomsday scenarios, so they can be prepared. That's exhausting. It's a bit like this old story of the Scottish man who went to his doctor in a heightened state of anxiety.

And he says, Doctor, help me. I'm dying. Everything I touch, it hurts. I touch my head, it hurts. I touch my foot, it hurts. I touch my belly, it hurts. Doc, you've got to save me. I'm dying.

And the doctor quickly examined the man and says, I've got some good news and bad news. Good news is you're not dying. Bad news is you have a broken finger. You know?

He missed the obvious. And we get it, right, don't we? Our anxieties, unchecked, raw and rampant, can make us live in a doomsday scenario where he missed the broken finger and thought he was dying.

Raising out the worst case scenarios. And I imagine as we read this psalm, many of us can connect with David's poetic language of feeling like a broken veil.

[13 : 06] Of feeling worthless and forgotten. That life has no more joy in it. But as we read this psalm, I hope we can also see it's not a psalm without hope.

It's not all doom and gloom. But actually, it has a joyous element to it. Like he even says in verse 7, I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul.

So it's quite a, it has a shift in it, this psalm. So where does the hope for the psalmist come from?

Where does this joy that he can sing about come from? Well, it's because he's not fixing his eyes on himself.

But he's lifting his eyes and fixing them on the Lord his God. That gives him a new perspective on his life. And we can see that throughout this psalm.

Because one wee word jumps out again and again and again as we read through this psalm. And it's a wee word, it's called you. It appears 38 times in his 24 verses.

[14:08] David doesn't leave us wondering who the you is. He says, in you Lord, I have taken refuge. So instantly, David's pulling his eyes off his present reality and focusing his eyes on the character of God.

He says, in God, he feels no shame. Verse 1, God is his rock and refuge. Verse 2, God is his father. His fortress or safe place.

Verse 3, his guide. Verse 3, his redeemer. God is sovereign in his life. God is good. God can be trusted. God is steadfast. God is faithful.

And he finishes with the great crescendo, doesn't he, on page 8. He says, love the Lord, all his faithful people. The Lord preserves those who are true to him. But the proud he pays back in full. Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord. God is a prophet. For David, the character of the Lord is not a theoretical thing.

[15:10] It's not a, like, vaporous, that you can't put weight on it. It's real. The Lord, his God, is mighty to save and David knew it. So this psalm is not a self-help psalm.

This psalm is not about self-correction, but it's about lifting our eyes off ourselves and onto the character of God who can overcome our fears, who can bring a sense of calm and safety.

No wonder throughout the psalms, most of the common words used for God in the psalms is solid rock, fortress, great shield. A safe space to unwind, to bring yourself before him fully and wholly.

God's character shapes how David sees the world and gives him a new perspective on himself.

David is reminding himself wonderfully of the character of God, how it is him who strengthens him.

And that's why he can say at the end, take heart, take heart in him. Be bold in him. And David uses language wonderfully in this psalm to kind of drive this home.

[16:25] He uses the two Hebrew words for God. The first one, God, kind of generic. You know, he's up there. He is all-powerful. He is God. He is holy. He is awesome.

But he also uses the word Lord, which is capitalized in your handouts today, L-O-R-D, capitalized. And that's God's covenant name.

So David is saying, God, you are up there, but you are also the Lord who freed my people from Egypt. You are also the God who guided my people through the desert.

You are the Lord God who gave me victory over the bear, the lion. And he says in this passage, doesn't he, to the Lord his God, incline your ear to me.

And that's like when you're sitting at the dinner table and you know your mum's speaking, and you go, eh? You know, you're trying to get, you're just a wee bit missing each other. You're close. And that's what he's saying here is, God is awesome, but the Lord is close to you.

[17:24] Our Lord God is intimate, real, strengthening us. And this is a stunning reality of the Christian faith, that we are in relationship with the Lord God of heaven and earth.

We sung it and we actually read it together in the catechism, that our Lord God inclines his ear to us as though he is that close to us, that he hears us when we feel broken, hurt, isolated, alone, and anxious, that he is near and ever present.

And this is so important for us to understand because if we don't, in the life of a Christian, two things most commonly happen. And the first, Neil touched on it again, is we have a breakdown or become extremely depressed because we become completely overwhelmed by our situation and our feelings.

Remember that situational stress and emotional stress, they just hit us and they wipe us out. We become cold and numb to others and our faith feels like embers.

We're like, why aren't we getting joy there like we used to? It's the sort of question we ask. Why am I not satisfied? And if it goes on for long periods of time, we can even doubt that we were Christians to begin with because everything is slowly sapping our joy and making us feel hopeless.

[18:51] And what subtly can come in, and I've seen it many a time, is this undercurrent of anger. Anger just because no change is possible is what we start to think. But really what has happened is our eyes have fallen on ourselves and we're looking for the answer within when we need to shift our perspective.

The second thing that can happen is we become great pretenders. Like the classic song Freddie Mercury sung, he says, oh yes, I'm the great pretender. Pretending I'm doing well.

My need is such, I pretend too much. I'm lonely and no one can tell. We pretend everything's all right. Yeah, fine. You don't let anyone in.

And really we're functioning as really anxious people. We're trying to control every situation just in case something goes wrong. And because we function as a great pretender, we can't trust God as we should.

Because what happens in our mind because we're anxious is this. What happens if he fails? What happens? So it's better actually I fall in myself rather than trust God.

[19 : 59] So we cruise through elder meetings, women's meetings, mums and toddlers group with a fake smile on our face when actually we really want to cry. We really want to just bear out our soul.

And it's so easy to fall into these two categories when we become anxious people, where we pretend or we become overwhelmed. What we need to do is shift our perspective as the psalmist teaches us onto the character of God and in him we can have hope.

Look at the ending of Psalm 31. It is a bit of a peculiar psalm when we think about the context of the ending where he says in verse 23, love the Lord, all his faithful people.

And why does David choose to end the last two verses with this? Because he's saying, yes, my situation might be what I'm facing, but the feeling is what we experience in life.

This is for the church. This psalm is not unique. There's many people who feel the feelings of this psalm and get caught up in our emotions. And David knew it well. So he tells us, love the Lord, all his faithful people.

[21 : 10] Be strong and take heart. He knows this is a corporate song for the church for all ages. Because in our anxiety, we think we are isolated. No one can know what we feel.

No one can understand. No one can connect with us. And what David's saying here is, God can. And in God, you are loved, cherished, and held fast. This psalm is for you.

No matter how broken you may feel, no matter how cut off you may feel, God's love and character is pursuing you. And if it was just words, I know that words in some way are cheap in our culture. Sometimes we need an action, don't we, to really prove something to us. We need something to back it up. But God displays that to us as well in Jesus Christ.

And he does it in two ways. First, Jesus came to deal with our greatest needs. He came to the cross to die for us, to destroy our sin, and to destroy death in him, so that we may have life, and life to the fullest, as the gospel says.

[22 : 20] But Jesus didn't just come and die like his 33 years before that are irrelevant. Jesus came to model what he looks to, trusting God in an anxious time.

He teaches us his perspective, and nowhere better do we see that than in the Garden of Gethsemane, do we? Where Jesus is totally and utterly overwhelmed, that his human faculties are almost breaking to the point where he is bleeding from his pores because of the pressure that is on him.

And what's his prayer at that moment? What's Jesus' prayer? Is it to look inward? No. He lifts his eyes upwards and prays, not my will be done, but yours, to his heavenly Father.

Jesus models for us what it looks like to trust, to bring all our anxiousness before the throne of grace and say, God, not my will be done, but yours.

I trust in your character. I trust in you. And I know you will enable me to move on from here. Because that's what anxieties do, isn't it?

[23 : 33] They pin us to the floor and think change is never possible. Whereas the psalmist is saying, take heart because change is possible in the Lord, your God. look to his will in your life.

I know like here at Cornerstone, we often cite creeds and we often, or we used to often say the Lord's Prayer together. And that says, our Father in heaven, see the closeness, hallowed be your name, the holiness of God, your kingdom come, he reigns, your will be done.

That's the hard part for us when we are anxious people, your will be done. Because we want to control it. But actually life, and life to the fullest, comes by trusting in the Lord.

And then the interesting thing is here, on earth as it is in heaven, and he goes to give us this day our daily bread. You know, just life. It moves on. See, once we've got that peace in place, when our perspective is shifted to our heavenly Father, life truly begins.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we also forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

