

“I Trust in You, O LORD; I Say, ‘You Are My God.’”

**Isaiah 50:4-9** The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher,<sup>1</sup> that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens -- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.<sup>5</sup> The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.<sup>6</sup> I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.<sup>7</sup> The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;<sup>8</sup> he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.<sup>9</sup> It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

**Psalm 31:9-16** Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.<sup>10</sup> For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery,<sup>11</sup> and my bones waste away.<sup>11</sup> I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror<sup>1</sup> to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me.<sup>12</sup> I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel.<sup>13</sup> For I hear the whispering of many -- terror all around! -- as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.<sup>14</sup> But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God."<sup>15</sup> My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.<sup>16</sup> Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

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I recently finished a sci-fi novel entitled *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell. The story goes that a radio telescope in Puerto Rico picks up very beautiful music from a planet near Alpha Centauri. The UN took ten years to decide to go whereas the Jesuits only took ten days. The main character is a Jesuit linguist named Emilio Sandoz who entered the priesthood around age 15 and had a knack for learning languages. He was no one spectacular, but by the end of the story his Jesuit superiors are ready to call him a saint. The team consisted of several of his closest friends, both priests and non-Christian alike. Emilio felt that God had called them to this and by the time they reached the planet he had come to experience a rich presence of God. He knew God was seeing them through and would make all things work out. They get to the planet and one of their members immediately gets sick and dies. They were forced to answer the question why God had brought them all this way for AI, the musicologist, to die before they do anything more than eat some plants.

Finally, they meet some of the inhabitants who welcome them graciously. Things are going well. They're learning the language and the culture. God was good. But...without giving the story away, they come into contact with another species of intelligent life, the ones who made the music, and two of them get eaten and three of them are slaughtered in a confrontation. Only, Emilio and one other priest who doesn't last much longer are left and they are taken captive to the capitol. There, Emilio finally gets to meet the king of the Ja'anata, as they are called, who is also the singer of the songs that were picked up by the telescope. Emilio concludes that all of this has happened to bring him to this

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meeting which ends with him being utterly humiliated. After several months of abuse and imprisonment another team of Jesuits arrives and sends him home alone on the ship he originally came on, a seventeen month journey alone.

When he returned to Earth 29 years total had gone by. He had to work through the trauma he had experienced, tell his superiors what happened, and wrestle with faith. God had been so close to him and yet the worst things imaginable happened to him. As two of the other priests said in conversation from which the book got its title, one of them quoting from Matthew said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.” And the other answered, “Yes, but the sparrow still falls.” The question then arises, “How can a sparrow’s losing its ability to fly and falling to the ground be the will of God?” or “How can bad things, very bad things happening to those whom God loves be in any way his will?” What kind of a God lets his children be victimized? Does not Jesus say to his disciples “Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” What kind of a God lets his children be victimized?

It is a harsh fact of Christian history that in this sin-corrupted world those who have been close to God and the most Christ-like have had to suffer senseless evil organizing against them and persecuting them to the point of death and worse. Christian history is full of martyrs. Those whom God has drawn close to himself and through whom God draws close to this world to do his work in it have been and will be inexplicably targeted by senseless evil. One would ask God why. And it’s not just the martyrs, I would say it is true of everyone who bears the name Christian. We will all come to points in our lives and quite often it is when we feel ourselves to be closest to God that we have to deal with some very dark stuff. How can God let evil happen to his beloved and it somehow be part of his will?

God is an odd bird. Take what happen to Jesus as an example. He is God the Father’s beloved Son become human. No one is closer to God than God. Jesus did everything according to his Father’s will. He did not deserve the evil that broke out against him; the betrayal, the denial, the Romans beating him to the point of being unrecognizable, and then the crucifixion. Yet, God’s way to deal with evil is not to respond to it with the strength of brute force, but rather to submit to it in weakness and forgive those who carried it out. That’s the way we are called to be when evil breaks out against us and victimizes us seeking to destroy who we are as persons simply because we belong to Jesus Christ and the Spirit of him who raised him from the dead lives in us. We who are in Christ are to submit to the evil and forgive those who perpetrate it against us knowing that somehow it is in Father’s will for his plan to save, renew, and heal his creation using us to do so. You see, we who are in Christ are the perpetrators, not of evil, but of the very love of God.

Isaiah 50 and Psalm 31 can be read as reflecting Christ’s own thoughts and voice we evil had amassed against him. The Isaiah passage reflects the prophet Isaiah at such a point in his life. He says I have been one taught by God to speak the word of hope to the weary. The LORD has opened my ears to hear. I have not been rebellious, yet I am being brutally shamed by those who have no

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case against me. But he says, “I will not be put to shame. I shall not be ashamed. The LORD is near me. It is he who vindicates me. Behold, the LORD himself helps me.” King David was the likely writer of Psalm 31. Verses 9 through 16 especially are a plea for grace (for God’s presence, favour, and acting on his behalf) for he was being wrongly punished by his enemies, even his neighbours and friends. Everyone was against him. He felt forgotten and overwhelmed in terror as he had to stand by and hear his enemies scheme to destroy him utterly. Yet, David says, “But I trust in you, O LORD. I say “You are my God.” My life is in your hands. Deliver me from my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon me. Save me with your steadfast love.” The Psalm ends saying, “Praise be to the LORD, for he showed his wonderful love to me when I was in a besieged city. In my alarm I said, ‘I am cut off from your sight!’ Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help. Love the LORD, all his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full. Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.”

Apparently, God does remain faithful to his children even when Hell has unleashed its fury against us simply because we are God’s children. It has been my experience that it is our Father’s acts of steadfast love towards us that leave us feeling his steadfast love. I used to be one of those who believed that if you are doing your best to do what you believe God wants you to do, then God will shine his face upon you and things will go well for you. But, and sparing you the details, it was in the midst of when I was where God wanted me to be doing what God wanted me to do and doing it well with a good amount of success that my life went haywire. Yet, it was in the midst of the haywire that I learned personally who Jesus Christ is as the one who takes upon himself our faithlessness and unfaithfulness and selfishness and victimization and dies with it so that we might live in him anew, changed, and healed to a certain degree.

In Galatians, Paul writes, “We know that a person is reckoned as righteous not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:16, 19-20). If we are Christians, there will come a time when it seems that we have been crucified with Christ so that we can know that it is he that lives in us. One of the mega-debates in the world of Bible study and theology is whether those prepositional phrases saying “through faith in Jesus Christ” ought to read “through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” According to Greek grammar the later is the more appropriate reading though they both work. As Christ lives in us so he makes us so that we are crucified with him so also he lives in us to make us to partake in his faith in and faithfulness to the Father. By our own efforts David’s words, “I trust in you, O LORD. I say ‘You are my God.’” cannot honestly be on our lips. No one but Jesus Christ has that kind of faith and he yet he gives it to us freely. All we need do is live accordingly.

Through that time of haywire in my life my circumstances were such that I was reduced to making a choice...taking matters into my own hands and provide for myself which would have appeared to be the honourable thing to do or letting my life remain in God’s hands and take the route that would seem to be filled with

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shame, the route that required me to lean on the love of others while I waited for the call to renew. Christ led me through the later and here I stand not because of any inner strength or faith of my own, but by his doings. “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.