

the heart of  
**GOD**  
series

# Hope for Hurting People

IN THE SHELTER OF HIS PRESENCE

BILL MILLS

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Palos Heights, Illinois



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THIS MINISTRY IS DEDICATED TO

The Glory of God  
The Honor of His Word  
The Building Up of the Body of Christ

The Heart of God series is also dedicated to our coworker Tom Hill, who for the past thirty years has brought the Father's heart of serving and encouragement to all of us on the staff of Leadership Resources International.



In the shelter of your presence you hide them from  
the intrigues of men; in your dwelling you keep  
them safe from accusing tongues.

Psalm 31:20

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## Hope for Hurting People

Our Father's compassion for hurting people is one of the most beautiful attributes of His heart. Throughout the Scriptures we see His commitment to widows and orphans and how He reaches out to the lonely and the suffering. In the ministry of the Lord Jesus, we see the fire in His eyes as He speaks to the Pharisees and the religious elite who placed heavy burdens on God's children. But we see incredible mercy toward the sinful and the weak, the sick and the broken.

King David knew the heart of the Father toward broken people. God's mercy met David when he repented after his terrible sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her faithful husband, Uriah. God met him once again in the terrible circumstances David faced when he wrote Psalm 31, which will be the focus of our study in this booklet.

We do not know the specific situation behind the writing of this psalm. It could have been written when David was fleeing from King Saul when Saul was seeking to kill him because David had already been anointed as the new king. God could also have given David this beautiful message of encouragement and hope when David's son Absalom was trying to kill him—his own father—and take over the kingdom.

Whatever the specific circumstances might have been, David is in terrible straits as he writes this psalm of worship to the Lord and gives it as a gift to you and me. We can clearly see the depth of his pain and the overwhelming anguish of his soul. We sense his aloneness and his fears; we know his despair over his life circumstances and his

anger toward his enemies. If you have ever battled despair and depression, I trust that this brief meditation will be a strong encouragement to your heart.

## **Seeing Unseen Realities**

As we look at Psalm 31, I want you to keep in mind the following verses from the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Corinth: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

As Paul wrote this letter to his brothers and sisters in Corinth, he, too, was in the midst of difficult circumstances. He was facing persecution, affliction, and despair. But in the midst of Paul's temporal experiences, God gave him the grace to see the unseen things, and Paul learned that the unseen things reflect the eternal realities of our lives.

Of course, God is not calling us to deny our difficult circumstances and the painful relationships that confront us every day. We must confront the very real struggles of our relationships and situations and deal with them honestly. But the ability to see God's sovereignty over every detail of our lives and His intimate involvement with us in every life situation brings us an eternal perspective that sets us free to worship Him and to walk with hope and confidence.

Come with me to a time some three thousand years ago, and spend some time with a man who would have been destroyed if God had not met him in the battles of his life. As we look at his life together, we will see some of the eternal realities with which God keeps our hearts.

## **A Rock and a Refuge**

As David writes this psalm, his enemies are surrounding him. There were many who desire his destruction. His circumstances are set against him as well, and his own feelings are continually betraying him. There is only one place to run for protection: “In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness. Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me” (Psalm 31:1-2).

From the start we can see the level of intimacy that David shares with his God. He knows his Lord well because this is not the first time that David has sought his heavenly Father when he had nowhere else to turn. From his life experiences and God’s faithful interventions, David has learned that God is a refuge, a deliverer, a rock, and a fortress.

These are vivid word pictures. David, like Paul, has been given the grace to see unseen things, and they help us to see them as well. We would do well to remember that Psalms is an Eastern book. In our Western culture, we tend to communicate more in the sterile terms of insights, principles, and concepts. Eastern teaching more often uses pictures and images. In fact, in Psalm 31, David gives us a series of vivid word pictures so that we can visualize with him the great power of God’s work on behalf of His children: “Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me” (Psalm 31:3).

There is an expectation in David’s heart that because of who God is, He will be all that David needs Him to be in his present situation. David knows that the reputation of the Shepherd is at stake in the way He cares for His sheep, so David appeals to God for protection and deliverance for the sake of His name: “Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth” (Psalm 31:4-5).

David sees God not only as a refuge but also as one into whose hands he can trust his spirit. Remember that David's "greater son," the Lord Jesus, repeated these words on the cross as He released His life to His Father. As David prayed for redemption, he knew that the promised Messiah would come, would redeem all who place their trust in Him, and would sit on the throne of David forever.

## **He Sets Our Feet in Spacious Places**

For just a moment, David allows his eyes to slip from his redeemer to his enemies. He reacts against them because they place their trust in worthless things: "I hate those who cling to worthless idols; I trust in the LORD" (Psalm 31:6).

But immediately after that statement David affirms his trust in his God, even speaking in terms of gladness and joy in the midst of his trying circumstances: "I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul" (Psalm 31:7). Why is David able to experience joy in such trying times? Because his God knows about every place of pressure and persecution; He sees the pain of David's life. God is there with His servant in the midst of it all.

Now David sets before us the first of the great word pictures in this psalm: "You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place" (Psalm 31:8). David is surrounded by his enemies and closed in by his circumstances. He seems to be pressured on every side. What difference does it make that God is there? It makes all the difference in the world! God enters into David's terrible situation and gives him space, time, encouragement, and hope.

In other words, God does just the opposite of what David's enemies are doing in his life—and of what our enemies are doing in yours and mine. Those who would destroy us close in and threaten us, but God gives us expanded places in

which to find our life with Him. We can almost hear David saying: “With You, I can be a real person. I can fall, and You are there to pick me up. Even when I sin, in my repentance and your forgiveness, I can be healed. Because of your grace and mercy, I can run freely toward all You have called me to be.”

Paul said to the church at Rome: “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold” (Romans 12:2, Phillips). We know that is exactly what the world would do with you and me if we were to allow it. It would put us in its mold and pressure us on every side, and we would come out looking just like everyone else. Our values, priorities, passions, and relationships would look like those of everyone around us.

In this world we become little people tightly squeezed into little places. That is not the way it is with God: He “sets [our] feet in spacious places.” He gives us expanded places in which to run freely until we become the men and women He calls us to be in His Son.

## **Terror on Every Side**

Once again David takes his eyes off of God’s great power and goodness, sees how big his enemies are, and begins to lose heart. Even his own feelings betray him: “Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak” (Psalm 31:9-10).

We see David sinking into despair. Anguish seems to overwhelm his soul. The attacks are too much for him, and he is quickly losing strength: “Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbors; I am a dread to my friends—those who see me on the street flee from me. I am forgotten by them as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery” (Psalm 31:11-12).



David is not only weak, he is also alone and rejected. Even those once closest to him now despise him and flee from his presence. It almost seems as if he is no longer in the land of the living, and David is a broken man in the midst of these attacks: "I hear the slander of many; there is terror on every side; they conspire against me and plot to take my life" (Psalm 31:13).

From every possible direction David is confronted by those who would tear him down with lies. Fear grips his heart as he hears of plots against his life in order to destroy the king.

## **Our Times Are in His Hands**

David is about to sink into the pit of despair and hopelessness. But God meets him once again and gives him a glimpse of the eternal realities that change even our most desperate circumstances. Here is the second of these great word pictures: "I trust in you, O LORD; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me" (Psalm 31:14-15).

When God gives David the light to see it, David remembers the foundational reality of his life: The sovereign Lord is his God, and all of the times of his life are in God's hands. Even with the wars taking place within him and around him, David knows that His Father in heaven has a sovereign timetable for every experience, circumstance, and relationship in his life.

Can we live with that same knowledge and confidence, knowing that all of the times of our lives are in the hands of a sovereign God? It was true for David, and it is true for you and me:

Our times of strength and our times of weakness  
Our times of joy and our times of sorrow  
Our times of sickness and our times of health  
Our times of hope and our times of despair

Our times of success and our times of failure  
Our times of fear and our times of confidence  
Our times of fruitfulness and our times of dryness  
Our times of intimacy and our times of loneliness  
Our times of emptiness and our times of fullness  
Our times of wealth and our times of poverty

All of our times are in God's hands. The times of our ancestors and our birth were in God's hands. The times of our life circumstances, our relationships, and our salvation are in His hands. Marriages come in the fullness of the Lord's timing. The times for our children are in His hands as well. What great encouragement for parents whose children are not walking with the Lord! The growth of our careers and our ministries are in His hands.

Sometimes when we are leading church meetings dealing with spiritual growth, marriage, or ministry, we hear brothers or sisters say, "If only I had known these truths earlier. Just think of all the pain I could have avoided, all the things God could have done through me!"

But that is not true because *God is never late*. He is always right on time. *All* of the times of our lives are in the hands of our sovereign God.

## **Even in Evil and Injustice**

Joseph knew the great truth that David is teaching us in Psalm 31. We see it clearly in the story of his family in Genesis 37-50. Joseph's brothers hated him so much that they wanted to kill him. Instead, they left him for dead and then sold him as a slave. In Egypt, his master's wife falsely accused him and he was sent to prison, where he was forgotten. Sin, evil, pain, and injustice seemed to confront Joseph at every turn. But God was intimately involved in it all, manipulating circumstances and relationships in the

precise sovereignty of His timing until Joseph had become the most powerful man in the most powerful kingdom in the world.

Because God had His hand on Joseph, that young man became ruler in all of Egypt and was sovereignly placed in that position to save his nation and his family during a terrible famine. Through the wisdom that God gave Joseph, he directed the officials of Egypt to save surplus grain during seven years of abundance. When seven years of famine came, Joseph had that extra grain available to preserve both his family and the people of Egypt.

In the midst of this great famine, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food. In a story filled with beauty and passion, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and his entire family was not only saved from starvation but was also invited to come to Egypt, where their future was preserved. Some years later Joseph's father, Jacob, died. And Joseph's brothers, fearing that Joseph would now repay them for their hatred and the evil they had brought into his life, came to him seeking his forgiveness: "His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. 'We are your slaves,' they said" (Genesis 50:18).

In their fear, Joseph's brothers pledged themselves to him as slaves. Joseph not only saw God's sovereignty exalted, but he also saw himself through God's eyes, and that transformed his relationship with his brothers.

## **We Are the Result of Our View of God**

Joseph said to [his brothers], "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" (Genesis 50:19)

Joseph knew that there was only one judge, and that was God. That left only one role for him in his relationship with his brothers: a servant, and he pledged to care for them and their families. Joseph's expanded view of God set him free to

become the servant of those who had sought his destruction: “‘You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.’ And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them” (Genesis 50:20-21).

There was incredible honesty in the heart of Joseph toward his brothers. He was not erasing facts from his memory or making believe that the relationships or circumstances were any less poisonous or painful than they actually were. But what changed it all, and especially Joseph’s response to his brothers, was his view of God’s sovereign hand in every relationship, circumstance, and life situation. In fact, when Joseph first revealed himself to his brothers, he described the devastating famine and then said, “God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt” (Genesis 45:7-8).

That is an incredibly large and expanded view of God: “God sent me ahead of you!” Joseph, like David, knew that all of his times were in God’s hands. In both David’s and Joseph’s situation, their view of God exalted in His sovereignty was a major aspect of the security they found in Him.

Everything about our lives flows out of how we view God. If we have a small view of God, we will have small hearts, small relationships, and small ministries. As our view of God becomes bigger, our hearts are set free to flourish and grow. We become children who are secure in the greatness of our God, and the fruitfulness of our relationships and ministries increases.

## **Our Father’s Smile of Approval**

As we return to Psalm 31, we hear David's cry once again for the blessing of his heavenly Father in the midst of his painful circumstances: "Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love" (Psalm 31:16).

When we are in the heat of terrible battles, what do we desire from the Lord? If you're like me, you pray for deliverance! I am sure that David desires deliverance as well, but the one thing he seeks even more is the smile of his heavenly Father: "Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave" (Psalm 31:17).

As David prays again for God's intervention in his life circumstances, he seems to base his appeal once again on the issue of God's reputation. If David is "put to shame" after he cries out to God, his enemies might say that God is powerless to protect His children: "Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous" (Psalm 31:18).

In David's understanding, if God is a God of justice, then He will vindicate David and put his enemies to shame. The lips of David's enemies, which have spoken only lies, will be forever silenced in death. When they were alive, they flaunted their arrogance toward the righteous day after day, but now the righteous speak of God's goodness and justice while the wicked are silent.

## **God Stores Up His Goodness**

David takes his eyes from his enemies and once again places them on His God, who is both powerful and good. In fact, as David writes his heart's song of worship, his sense of the goodness of his Father becomes fuller and fuller. Now his voice takes up the words of the song, and David's worship reaches an even greater crescendo: "How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear

you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you" (Psalm 31:19).

When we think of what David faces in the circumstances surrounding this psalm, his worship becomes even more striking. David's enemies surround him, his circumstances close in on him, and even his own feelings betray him. Surely, Satan, the great enemy of David's soul, would have him question God's goodness now.

Satan also leads us to question the goodness of God when we face the pain and pressure of our lives. As we confront these difficulties, our enemy asks: *Where is God now? If He really loved you, you wouldn't be hurting like this.* But in the darkest days of our lives, when we are alone and afraid or in great need, God's commitment to us has not diminished, nor has His character changed. He is good and worthy of our praise and the thankfulness of our hearts.

God gives King David the grace to see the eternal realities of his life in the midst of his temporal experiences, just as He later does for the apostle Paul. Even though David's days are dark, he knows that God is storing up His goodness on his behalf and that one day God will pour that goodness upon him.

Joseph knew that as well. Just as he stored up the grain in those seven years of abundance, God stored up His goodness for Joseph in those many years of exile, slavery, and imprisonment. Then the day came when God poured His goodness upon Joseph and his family in a way that transformed their lives and relationships, and it was glorious in their eyes.

As we study this psalm of worship from David's heart, you may be experiencing more pain than your heart can bear. Perhaps there is separation or brokenness in our relationships. Job stresses or financial pressures may be causing you to fear the future. Sickness or emotional battles may be draining your strength away. Depression and

despair may have stolen your hope, and you find yourself in very lean times.

If any of these situations describe the state of your life, the Word of God offers wonderful encouragement: God is storing up His goodness for you this very day! And a day will come when He pours His goodness upon you to such a degree that you will not be able to contain it. Only faith will enable you to see the eternal realities in the midst of your temporal circumstances.

The apostle Paul talks this way about the goodness God stores up for His children: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

## **God Hides Us in the Shelter of His Presence**

As David worships the Lord—and counsels his readers—a third vivid word picture fills his heart: “In the shelter of your presence you hide [your people] from the intrigues of men; in your dwelling you keep them safe from accusing tongues” (Psalm 31:20).

At the same time that God holds our times, both good and bad, in His sovereign hands and stores up His goodness for us in even the most difficult battles, He also hides us in the shelter of His presence. In this hiding place—*the very dwelling place of our God*—the accusations and plans of our enemies *cannot touch us*.

This is the refuge and fortress that David refers to when he begins this psalm. As he describes the security and protection that he found in his God, David talks about this dwelling place that the Father has prepared for His children when they are afraid or face attacks from their enemies.



This secure refuge is nothing less than God's presence, and there we find shelter.

David's words remind me of the psalm of Moses: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations" (Psalm 90:1). Moses describes what our God desires to be for us. He does not want to be a theological idea that expands our minds and stretches our mental capacities. He does not desire to be understood as an impersonal force somewhere in the universe. *God wants to be the place where His children live.*

The idea of God as the "environment" in which we live our lives is an awesome concept. It can transform the way we respond to our circumstances, the people around us, and the evil that seems to intrude into our life situations. The more God becomes the place in which we live, the freer and more secure our hearts will become.

## **Resting in God's Shadow**

The apostle Paul taught this same truth to the philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens. They had set up idols to as many gods as they could imagine; then, fearing that they might have inadvertently left one out, they titled one "the unknown god." Paul takes this as an opportunity to proclaim the gospel of the living God. After revealing Him as the Creator and the sovereign One who determines the places of our lives in order that we might seek and know Him, Paul says: "In him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:28).

This is the same concept that Moses sets before us in Psalm 90. He wants us to find our being in Him. God desires to become the very place in which we live, the dwelling place for our lives.

I am grateful that in God's sovereignty He placed Psalm 91 right after Psalm 90, because we go directly from Moses'

prayer about God as our dwelling place to David's prayer: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust'" (Psalm 91:1-2).

The teaching and imagery in those two psalms are so similar to what we see in Psalm 31. Nothing in this world can bring us the security that we find in the shadow of the Almighty or in the refuge under His wings: "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart" (Psalm 91:4).

## **God's Wonderful Love in a Besieged City**

As David continues his series of word pictures that describe the ways God meets us in the afflictions and trials of our lives, he enables us to face the attacks and visualize the care of the Father in the midst of them all: "Praise be to the LORD, for he showed his wonderful love to me when I was in a besieged city" (Psalm 31:21).

As we envision the picture David paints for us, we see a walled city where its citizens are seeking protection. We also see the approach of an army, one that far outnumbers the army within the city walls. The enemy advances relentlessly, and fear grips the hearts of the people in the city. With every step of the enemy, defeat seems more certain. Soon flaming arrows are coming over the walls, followed by the spears of the attackers. Battering rams are crushing the gates, and the situation in this besieged city looks hopeless.

When do we know with the most certainty that God loves us? When the circumstances of our lives fall into place well, we feel loved and secure. When our husband or wife pledges faithfulness and our children are responsive, we see

a bright tomorrow. When our careers are going well and we are able to pay all of our bills, we are confident. When we are able to save for the future and our health is good, we feel that God is caring for us.

But when dark days come, Satan reminds us that God is not taking care of us the way He promised when we became His children. If God really loved us, he says, He would not allow us to be sick or alone or to battle despair. Satan says that God's love is measured only in the abundance of His provisions because He promised to keep His children healthy, wealthy, and happy.

That is contrary to David's experience. It is when things are *not* going well for David that he knows God's wonderful love in this "besieged city." Is that possible for us as well? Can we know God's love as never before during the greatest attacks of our lives? Yes! It is in those times that we most clearly see our Father's love and care for us. We may well face "besieged cities" in our life experiences, but even as the armies of our enemies advance, our God will make His wonderful love known to us. And the faithfulness of His love is more precious than any provision of His hand.

## **Take Heart, and Hope in God**

Even though we live in the shelter of God's presence, when we are locked in a "besieged city" in our lives, we may still face great fear. David experienced in the battles surrounding the writing of this psalm: "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" (Psalm 31:22).

You may have been in David's place. In the midst of attacks we sometimes feel that God does not see our plight, that He is not aware of the pain or hopelessness we feel from being alone in the face of our enemies. But even when we are afraid, God hears our cries and has mercy on us when we call His name: "Love the LORD, all his saints! The

LORD preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full” (Psalm 31:23).

Here David begins to counsel you and me. In the light of how God met him in this great battle, he encourages us to keep our affections focused on the Lover of our souls. God preserves the faithful. That is the bottom line of our confidence. David teaches us how we can endure through even the most terrible battles of our lives and in the face of our most frightening enemies. Our hope does not lie in our ability to hold on to God and continue to walk in the face of our trials. Our security is rooted in the great, powerful, and good God who holds on to us. Our Lover is also our Keeper: “Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD” (Psalm 31:24).

In light of God’s abundant provisions and His intimate presence during this intense battle with his enemies—and even with his own soul—David desires to lift our hearts as well. He paints a glorious picture of our Father’s heart toward His children when they face great trials. After previously calling us to “love the Lord,” David now calls us to be strong in Him. It’s easy to lose heart in the battles of our lives, but when we hope in God, we gain heart!

With these words, David encourages us. He fills our hearts with courage and strength by giving us an exalted view of God. No matter how great our enemies are, our God is greater still. In our darkest days, we can glory in the hope we find in Him.

## **God Preserves the Faithful**

I often have opportunities to teach in the Philippines, a country whose people I have grown to love deeply. When I travel there, I always look forward to seeing my friends Irv and Mary Stauffer. Irv and Mary are career missionaries with the Baptist General Conference, and they have wonderful gifts of organization, service, and encouragement in

addition to their substantial teaching ministries. I have enjoyed their help and hospitality on many visits to Manila.

In May 1980, Irv and Mary had finished their first term of service in the Philippines and were just concluding a year of home assignment in St. Paul, Minnesota. Five days before they were scheduled to return to the Philippines, Mary took their eight-year-old daughter, Beth, to the hairdresser. As they left the beauty parlor and approached their car, they were confronted by a young man with a gun, who kidnapped them and held them captive in his home.

At first, Mary did not recognize their captor. But then the young man reminded her that she had been his math teacher his first year of high school, in 1966. He related that he had received all A's during his high school career except for the grade Mary had given him and that her grade had cost him a scholarship to the school he desired to attend. His hatred over this perceived injustice and the fact that he was also consumed with sexual fantasies about Mary were the motives for the kidnapping.

After placing a plastic bag over Beth's head and threatening to kill her, the kidnapper captor forced Mary to submit to his sexual advances. For seven weeks, except for a brief trip they took, the man kept Mary and Beth in a small closet. There was no way of escape, and their situation seemed hopeless.

God's presence was His sustaining grace for Mary and Beth during those weeks. Even in those devastating circumstances they knew His love and care. After fifty-two days, their captor used a bicycle chain and cable to fasten them to a closet door and then went to work. What he didn't know was that the door had a loose hinge pin. By God's grace, Mary and Beth were able to remove the hinge pin and escape their terrible prison.

In the course of the investigation, authorities learned that the kidnapper had made nine hours of videotape in which he recorded his sexual attacks on Mary and many of their

conversations. The trial included a review of three hours of taped conversation between Mary and her captor. Again and again Mary shared the gospel of Christ with him, and at one point told the one who was seeking to destroy her life, "When Jesus is in control of your life, you can endure something like this."

During Mary's testimony the defense attorney asked her, "When you used the term *Christian* on the videotape, what did you mean?"

Mary responded, "I meant it in the sense of being born again, the sense of believing in Jesus Christ and trusting Him as Savior, of having Him as ruler of your life." Mary's heart and faith were not destroyed during her devastating battle. The gospel of Christ, which had been her mission in the Philippines, was also her mission in the closet and in the courtroom.

While Mary was testifying during the trial, her kidnapper got away from his guards and got behind Mary. Holding a smuggled jackknife at her throat, he threatened her again. Again God protected Mary's life, but in the scuffle that followed, she received a four-inch cut on her cheek and needed sixty-two stitches to close the wound.

In spite of the ordeal Mary, Beth, and Irv had undergone, God healed wounds in a glorious way. In an interview after the trial, Mary showed no bitterness or anger. She said, "I hope I don't forget all the wonderful things God has done and all that I learned. I even hope that I don't forget my feelings of depression and discouragement because, really, I had never felt that way before."

Irv also described the glorious grace God had given him: "After going through the sufferings and heartache of the experience, it is my concern that we don't forget about it, but that it will make us sensitive to the needs of others as they are struggling, as they are going through times of crisis and tragedy."

The mission asked Irv and Mary to undergo counseling before they returned to the Philippines. Although they felt no need for it, they graciously submitted to their leadership. The counseling sessions quickly revealed that God had protected and healed them, and they returned to Manila. Thinking back on the experience, Mary says, “My only scar is on my cheek.”

Why were Irv, Mary, and Beth able not only to endure and survive such a devastating ordeal but also to triumph in the midst of it? Because their experience was the same as David’s in Psalm 31. Just as God came to David when he was in despair and about to be destroyed, God came to my friends. He came to them in that closet, with the fears that surrounded them, and set their feet in spacious places. He reminded them that He was their God and that their times were in His hands, and then He caused His face to shine upon them. Even in those terrible circumstances, God was storing up His goodness for them, preparing to pour it all on them in His sovereign timing. He hid them in the shelter of His presence and showed His wonderful love to them while they were in a besieged city!

So along with King David, Moses, and the apostle Paul, my friends Irv and Mary would encourage you and me to persevere today. Together they shout to us, “God preserves the faithful! Be strong, take heart, and hope in God!”

## **Questions for Interaction and Application**

We encourage you to use this booklet as a four-week personal devotional tool or as material for a class or small group. These questions and reflections will help you in that process.

### **Week One**



1. As we come to Psalm 31, we see King David in very real battles with his enemies. How do you reconcile that David is a “man after God’s own heart,” and still he is so often in despair?
2. Do you often struggle with depression and despair? As you read Psalm 31, where do you most identify with David in his battles within and without?
3. When we look at the apostle Paul’s statement to the church at Corinth, “therefore we do not lose heart,” does it seem to you that our heavenly Father knows how vulnerable we are to losing heart? What does Paul teach himself, and you and me, about how God keeps us from losing heart?
4. How do you respond to the thought of “God’s sovereignty over every detail of our lives and His intimate involvement with us in every life situation?” Have you found that to be true in your life? Why or why not?

## **Reflections**

Think back to some of your times of fear and despair, and remember how your Father met you in those experiences. Thank Him for His faithfulness to you again and again, and worship God for His mercies that are new for you every morning. Ask God to give you the grace to see the “unseen things” in the midst of your temporal experiences. Pray that God would make you more aware each moment of His sovereign power and His intimate involvement in every detail of your life. Worship Him for the fact that His presence changes everything!

## **Week Two**

1. David describes God for us as a refuge, a deliverer, a rock and a fortress. Think of the times when God has been those very realities for you. What difference did that make in your life experiences?
2. What does it mean to you that God “sets your feet in spacious places?” How, or in what circumstances, does He come to you and bring “room, time, and encouragement?”
3. Have you experienced feelings like David describes in verses 9-13? How do you reconcile those in the heart of a child of God?
4. How do you respond to the teaching that “all of the times of our lives are in the hands of a sovereign God?” Have you lived with that awareness from day to day? Can you do that even in experiences of pain and injustice, as Joseph did?

## **Reflections**

Worship God for His power and protection in your life. Picture Him, as David calls us to, as that rock and refuge for your life. Thank Him that He does not “squeeze you into a mold,” but gives you room and encouragement for your life. Think back on how your times have been in God’s sovereign hands. Remember the good times of hope and joy, and the times of despair and difficulty. Tell God how much you love Him for making all of those times a part of His process in your life, your relationships, and your ministry.

## **Week Three**

1. Joseph was able to respond to his brothers, who had become his enemies, and his painful circumstances, the way he did because of his exalted vision of God and His

sovereignty. In what areas of your life do you need your vision of God to grow larger?

2. What is the relationship in your life between praying only for deliverance in difficult circumstances and seeking the smile of your heavenly Father's approval?
3. It must have been a matter of great faith for David to know that God was storing up His goodness for him even in the midst of these painful trials and difficult circumstances. Where in your life right now are you experiencing "lean times," and you need faith to know that God is storing up His goodness for you?
4. When you think of God "hiding you in the shelter of His presence," what is He hiding you from right now? What does His shelter look like, and what does it provide for you?

## **Reflections**

Ask God to make your vision of Him bigger and bigger each day. No matter how exalted God is in your eyes, He is still greater than you see Him. Your worship will flow from how you see God. Pray that His holiness and His power, His sovereignty and His mercy will fill your eyes and your heart. Tell God that you want the smile of His approval that flows from His grace, and that you want to live in such a way that reflects His goodness to you. Ask your Father to hide you today in the shelter of His presence so that you can rest in the shadow of His wings!

## **Week Four**

1. As you look back over your life experiences, do you tend to know God's wonderful love in your best days or your

greatest difficulties? How do you think it was possible for David to experience God's love with the most certainty in the midst of the greatest battles of his life?

2. Do you feel that you are in a "besieged city" right now? What does it look like? What are your feelings in the process? How confident are you that God will protect you and reveal His love to you in this?
3. How did you respond to the story of Irv, Mary, and Beth? What questions did it raise in your mind? How does it relate to your view of God?
4. Irv, Mary, and Beth experienced in their trials the very same realities of God's presence in their relationship with Him that David experienced in Psalm 31. Think of the circumstances and trials in your life when you have experienced these same realities in your relationship with God.

## **Reflections**

David closed his psalm with a call to worship for you and me. He proclaimed: "Love the Lord, all his saints!" We can see how David's heart has been filling up with praise and thanksgiving as he has shared this message of encouragement and hope with us. Now he wants to do the very same thing with you and me. Let's follow his counsel and remember how God has preserved our lives and poured His grace upon us and allow our hearts, too, to fill up with worship in the presence of the Lord. Tell God how much you love Him for setting your feet in spacious places, for how he has held all of your times in His sovereign hands, for storing up His goodness for you, hiding you in the shelter of His presence and showing His wonderful love to you in the besieged cities of your life. Know that you will be

strengthened in this process, and your heart will be filled with hope once again!

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## theheart of GOD series

Moses prayed: "Teach me your ways so that I may know you" after he experienced his greatest intimacy with God. When he hungered to see His face, God allowed Moses to see the beauty of His heart. What does the heart of God look like?

In this series we look closely at the heart of God, and how He gives Himself to us. We explore what we look like when our Father builds His heart into us and gives us His passions, attitudes and priorities. We will ask God how we can give His heart to one another so that our relationships reflect the beauty of our Lord.

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