

“Steal Away to Jesus”

Psalm 31; Matthew 6:5-8 ¹

Lois Spoon was in a tight spot. It was 1:30 p.m., and she had just come from lunch with several ladies from her church, where she had spent the last money she had to pay for lunch for a missionary from Romania. In only thirty minutes, she needed \$153.27 to pay the balance of a plane ticket that would take her to some much-needed medical treatment. Here’s her story about what happened . . .

“**God will provide my need,**’ I said confidently to myself. But my certainty began to waiver as the breeze blew through my car windows. **No one else knew of my need.**

“What should I do? Keys still clutched in my hand, I laid my head back against the headrest and thought of that verse that tells how Jesus’ disciples needed money to pay for their taxes (Matthew 17:27). He told them to go out on the lake and the first fish they caught would have a coin in its mouth that would cover the amount they needed.

“‘Dear Lord,’ I prayed, ‘I need a fish soon! Please show me where to find the lake.’

“I glanced in my rear-view mirror and saw a small black sports car back out, pull back into its parking space, then pull back out again. I recognized the driver as Beverly Easton, one of the women with whom I had just had lunch. Beverly drove slowly out of the parking lot, circled the restaurant, pulled back into the lot, got out, and walked over to my car.

“‘I know you don’t know me very well and I hope you don’t think I’m crazy,’ she said. ‘I’m so embarrassed. Please don’t be offended by this.’

“‘What’s the matter, Beverly?’

“‘Well,’ she hesitated, ‘several months ago God told me to put change in an envelope for you. I’ve just carried it around and been adding to it every day until I got the nerve to give it to you. I hope this isn’t insulting.’ Her face was red as she tossed a bulging envelope onto my car seat. ‘I just have to obey God,’ she mumbled, and rushed off to her car.

“Makeup smudges and smeared ink covered the once-white envelope. My name was scribbled on the front in big letters, and there was a card inside explaining that she wasn’t sure why, but God had told her to give me this money. It was dated several months earlier. With tears in my eyes, I began to count the money in the envelope. There were bills of several denominations and lots of change.

“The Bible says in Hebrews 13:8 that ‘God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.’ If He provided for the disciples, He can provide for us today. This time it wasn’t a lake He used, but a lady named Beverly. And it wasn’t a fish, but a smudged up envelope. One that contained exactly \$153.27.”² *Hang onto that thought.* It will be behind everything else we do this morning.

Now that we’ve almost made our way through March, today’s message is the last of our Black History-themed messages for this year. Pastor Andrew has done three messages, and with this one, I’ll have done three, also.

Today’s message was inspired by the Negro Spiritual, “Steal Away,” which *Wikipedia* says was composed by Wallace Willis, a slave of a Choctaw freedman in the Indian Territory of what

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 24, 2019.

² Lois Spoon, “Divine Calculation: My Prayer was Answered by Someone’s Pocket Change,” *Today’s Christian* (September/October 1999).

became Oklahoma, sometime before 1862. Various traditions are associated with the song. One tradition has it that the song was used to alert slaves that a secret religious meeting would be held that night. Other traditions associate it with escape to freedom, as the background of this morning's *PowerPoint* suggests. The most familiar part of the song is the chorus:

**Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, steal away home.
I ain't got long to stay here.**

As I pondered this spiritual this week, my thoughts kept coming back to the idea of "stealing away to Jesus in the secret place," an idea having to do with prayer, and that led me to the text Andrew read earlier. The text is a familiar one, coming from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

⁵ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:5-8).

Apparently it was the custom in those days for Jewish folk to stop whatever they were doing at about 3 in the afternoon and to offer prayer to God as the evening sacrifices were being made in the Temple. Some folk did this quietly and discreetly, while others were given to loud and pretentious display.

In this pronouncement, Jesus wasn't condemning public prayer, long prayers, or even repetitive prayers, since He himself practiced each of these things, at least occasionally.³ Nor was Jesus probably talking about a literal private or secret room, since most ordinary people had no such rooms in their homes.

The point Jesus was making is that prayer, whether public or private, is personal conversation with God, not a flowery speech intended to impress human onlookers. Nor is prayer an incantation intended to manipulate God with magical formulas. As we noted last week, *the primary purpose of conversation with God is not to get God to do things for us, but to take us into deep and joyful relationship with God and meaningful, purposeful partnership with God in the governance of the world and the inbreaking of God's Kingdom. **Prayer is simply giving the wise and good God an opportunity to do what His wisdom and love want done.***⁴

While that's just as true this morning as it was last week, our relationship with our heavenly Father is a dynamic one, and that relationship doesn't always feel to us as though it is meaningful, joyful, and purposeful. Sometimes, our relationship with God is confused and painful. Sometimes our lives are surprised, not by joy, but by vulnerability, chaos, brokenness, suffering, and even death. What is prayer supposed to be like in those times?

The Bible's answer to that question is that in such times, we "lament." When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when our faith hurts, we cry out in lament.

³ Matthew 26:44; Luke 6:12, 18:1

⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1949), p. 59.

Well over one-third of the Psalms are prayers of individual or corporate lament,⁵ and the fact that those who put their trust in God continue to experience pain and suffering is the whole point of these psalms of lamentation. The psalms of lament tell us that it is okay to express our real, uncensored feelings to God. These psalms tell us that lament is not a failure of faith, but is an act of faith.

I mentioned last week that I've combined all the dates in the margins of my Bibles into just one Bible, and when I looked at the psalms of lament, I found that I have eight different dates written beside one of those psalms, Psalm 31. I'd say that's probably the most dates I have written beside any one chapter of the Bible; and for just a moment or two, I'd like to consider Psalm 31 with you. If you have your Bible, you might want to open it to Psalm 31.

Scholars disagree about the structure of this psalm, but the structure that makes the most sense to me is to see it as a prayer in three movements: vv. 1-8; vv. 9-13; and vv. 14-24. The psalm is attributed to David, but it is unclear just what his circumstances might have been at the time he wrote it.

Psalm 31:1-8. The psalm begins with an affirmation of faith coupled with a plea that God "*come quickly to my rescue.*" David experienced himself as being beset by enemies who have laid traps for him, and he vacillated between passionate expressions of faith, fear, and doubt.

David affirmed that he had taken refuge in God's faithful love, but at the same time, he didn't feel entirely safe from harm. He affirmed that God "knows the anguish of my soul," and he penned the phrase that became Messiah Jesus's last prayer: "*Into your hands I commit my spirit.*"⁶

In verse 7, David affirmed that "*I will be glad and rejoice in your love,*" recognizing that we have the ability to determine how we will respond to our circumstances. And in verse 8, David acknowledged God's protection thus far in this crisis.

But, as would be the case with Jesus, David discovered that committing our spirits into God's care does not always result in deliverance from suffering or even death. Committing our spirits into God's care means that we give ourselves completely to the trustworthy love of God, come what may.

Psalm 31:9-13. In the second movement of David's prayer, he fell away from what confidence he was able to muster in the first movement. "*I am in distress!*" he wrote. "*My eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and 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.*"

David's confidence ebbed away in a flood of tears. As we do ourselves when we steal away to Jesus, David floated back and forth between confidence in God's care and protection and desperate pleading for speedy rescue.

It begins to become apparent that David's crisis arose from being slandered and becoming through that slander an object of public contempt: "*Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbors and an object of dread to my closest friends. . . . I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become [cast away] like broken pottery.*"

⁵ Psalms of individual lament include 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 37, 39, 41, 42, 43, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 80, 86, 88, 102, 120, 121, 123, 126, 130, 139, 140, 141, and 142.

⁶ Luke 23:46

This helps us to recognize one of the important movements in our own “stealing away to Jesus.” Bitterness, fear, and anger do not just evaporate, and if we do not recognize them and open these emotions up before God, God’s healing of our spirits is greatly hindered.

Think about a deep wound in your leg. If the surgeon just sewed up the wound without cleaning it, infection would develop. That infection would become gangrene, and you would eventually lose your leg, if not your life. But if the surgeon cleans the wound all the way to its full depth, even though that procedure is messy and painful, then it becomes possible for the wound to become fully healed over time.

Lament is like that. As we pour our hearts out to our Father in the secret place, as we express our pain to the fullest and “get it all out,” then God’s healing can begin.⁷ And in this way, it is noteworthy that nearly every psalm of lament ends on a note of praise, as the wound of pain is lanced and the healing balm of God’s faithfulness is applied. It is so with Psalm 31 as well.

Psalm 31:14-24. In the midst of his cries of misery and abandonment, David began verse 14 with a crucial conjunction: “BUT.” “*BUT I trust in you, LORD. . . . My times are in your hands. . . . Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.*”

Through a willful choice to believe in God’s faithfulness, David turned a corner in the secret place. He still cried out for deliverance, but he could also begin to perceive that God was at work: “*Praise be to the LORD, for he showed me the wonders of his love when I was in a city under siege. 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. . . . Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.*”

This, too, is reminiscent of Jesus’ Cry of Dereliction from the Cross—“I am cut off from your sight”⁸—and, far beyond the vindication David received, our Lord Jesus *was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead* (Romans 1:4). And it is still true today that God shows His faithful love in ways far beyond anything we could ask or imagine when we “steal away to Jesus in the Secret Place” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Well, one more story and we’re done. You’ll remember that in our first story, Lois Spoon believed that God would provide her need, even though no one else knew of that need, and that this did, in fact, happen in a most remarkable way. Here’s another story of that sort. This one is from Henry Blackaby, author of *Experiencing God*:⁹

“For twelve years I served as a pastor in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. When we started our first mission church, we called Jack Conner as our mission pastor.

“Although the new congregation needed a full-time pastor, we had no money for moving expenses and no provision for his salary. But we knew God was asking us to invite Jack to come. He had three children in school, so we needed to pay him at least a modest salary with which to care for his family. We began to pray that God would provide for his moving expenses and his salary once he arrived.

“Jack had a secure job as a senior pastor in California. Yet we were asking him to move his family to a new country with no guarantee of a steady paycheck. Jack and his wife, Bonna, prayed, and they, too, sensed God’s hand at work. Jack began to take his family up a mountain just as Abraham had done, without knowing just how his need would be met when he arrived.

⁷ For an excellent exposition of this principle, see Lewis Smedes, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (HarperOne, 1996).

⁸ Mark 15:34

⁹ Blackaby, Henry T., and Claude V. King. *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1990.

“I did not have an extensive list of contacts I could canvas for Jack's financial support. I felt the full weight of what I was asking Jack to do, and I began asking myself, ‘How in the world will God make this provision?’ **Then it dawned on me that as long as God knew where I was, He could cause anybody in the world to help me. He could place my need on the heart of anyone anywhere.**

“Jack was approved by Canadian immigration and began his trek of faith. As he prepared to move, I received a letter from a church in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The pastor said, ‘God has laid it on our hearts to send one percent of our mission giving to Saskatchewan missions. We are enclosing a check to use however you choose.’

“I had no idea how they became involved with us at that time, but a large donation was included with the letter. Not long afterwards, someone called me and pledged to contribute funds every month for Jack’s financial support. That promise brought the monthly financial package to the level we had hoped to pay Jack.

“When Jack drove into our driveway with his family. I asked, ‘Jack, what did it cost to move you?’ **The amount was almost exactly what the church in Arkansas had just sent us.**

“We began that step of faith by believing what the Bible teaches: that *God can use anyone, anywhere, to be His instrument of provision for those who trust Him* (Philippians 4:13). We had believed God, and we had followed through in obedience. We already knew academically that God was One who provides. But after that event, our whole church came to know from experience that God is, indeed, the Provider. Calling Jack by faith and seeing God provide for him led us to a deeper love relationship with an all-sufficient God.”

That how prayer works, my friends. Steal Away to Jesus. Steal Away.

Invitation: “I Must Tell Jesus”