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### **Psalm 31:19-20, ESV**

<sup>19</sup> *How great is the goodness  
you have stored up for those who fear you.  
You lavish it on those who come to you for protection,  
blessing them before the watching world.*  
<sup>20</sup> *You hide them in the shelter of your presence,  
safe from those who conspire against them.  
You shelter them in your presence,  
far from accusing tongues.*

### **Exodus 25:1-9, ESV**

*The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> “Tell the people of Israel to bring me their sacred offerings. Accept the contributions from all whose hearts are moved to offer them. <sup>3</sup> Here is a list of sacred offerings you may accept from them:*

*gold, silver, and bronze;*

<sup>4</sup> *blue, purple, and scarlet thread;  
fine linen and goat hair for cloth;*

<sup>5</sup> *tanned ram skins and fine goatskin leather;  
acacia wood;*

<sup>6</sup> *olive oil for the lamps;  
spices for the anointing oil and the fragrant incense;*

<sup>7</sup> *onyx stones, and other gemstones to be set in the ephod and the priest’s  
chestpiece.*

<sup>8</sup> *“Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them.*

<sup>9</sup> *You must build this Tabernacle and its furnishings exactly according to the pattern  
I will show you.*

## **Riding on a rim.**

When I was a young man in southern California, I was driving along one Sunday morning – not going to church, by the way. I don't remember where I was going. But I was on a long, east-west road, called Venice Boulevard, that runs all the way from the ocean to downtown L.A. I found myself driving behind a man whose car was making a loud clunk, clunk sound and was throwing up sparks from the right rear wheel. And that's all it was – a wheel; there was no tire on the rim. In fact, the rim wasn't even intact. He had already abused it enough that a chunk had fallen off. Periodically, the wheel would stop turning and would just scrape along for a while; it seemed to depend on how fast he was going. The slower he went, the more likely the wheel was to just slide. He was also leaving a nice two-inch-wide gouge behind him in the pavement. My initial reaction to him was *What a jerk*. (Except that I was thinking a ruder word than jerk.). He was in a small car, a front wheel drive Japanese subcompact, I believe, back in the day when subcompacts really were, well, subcompact. I could have passed him. We were moving well below the speed limit and normally I did not have the patience for anything less than five or ten miles an hour over the speed limit. Yes, I was young, and I came from a car family. There was no way that I was going to let someone slow me down like that, at least not normally. But for some reason, as

cars whooshed around both of us, some of them honking their horns, I just mellowed out and studied this man. He was clearly very short, with only the top of his gray-haired head showing above the seatback. The car itself was actually in good shape, fairly new with nice paint. I couldn't see any damage, but I did wonder what that raw rim might be doing to the wheel well. I wondered if a cop would come along and pull him over. But a number of blocks went by, with sparks flying, another piece of the rim breaking off, and that older man being bounced up and down as he rolled along on his broken rim. Did he not have enough money to buy a new tire? Perhaps his car payments were too much for him. Had he just had a flat and didn't know that you can't drive on a rim? Was he drunk at 8 A.M. on a Sunday?

I will get back to this man, but first consider Psalm 31, verses 19 and 20, our first reading for today:

*<sup>19</sup> How great is the goodness  
you have stored up for those who fear you.  
You lavish it on those who come to you for protection,  
blessing them before the watching world.*

*<sup>20</sup> You hide them in the shelter of your presence,  
safe from those who conspire against them.  
You shelter them in your presence,  
far from accusing tongues.*

The Psalms are poetry. It's believed that they were sung during services offered by ancient Israelites and then the Jews. It's guessed that they were collected into more or less their current form a couple of hundred years before Jesus was born. Many of the Psalms, including 31, are attributed to King David. It is about protection from God, with the Psalmist telling the Lord that he needs help, that he is surrounded by enemies and begging God to disgrace the wicked. The Psalm ends with a joyful declaration that God has indeed come to the aid of the Psalmist. We note that our first Bible passage tells us that God will not only give us sanctuary from those who conspire to attack us, but God will also shelter us from those who speak badly of us. The Psalm acknowledges that evil comes in the form of physical harm as well as verbal defamation. Things haven't changed much in a couple thousand years: we, too, live in fear of what people will say about us and the harm it will cause us.

I followed the man in the three-legged car until he turned off Venice Boulevard. On impulse, I turned with him, abandoning whatever errand I was on. It got to a point where his left rear wheel stopped rotating altogether. It began to make an extremely loud scraping sound, and I imagined the road repair crew that would be following his tracks, laying down a squiggly line of tar to fill in the many-blocks-long crevice. Then, something in his right rear suspension snapped. It was

extremely loud, and a chunk of metal shot out and flew across the roadway and onto the sidewalk. With a final metallic crunch, he made it to the curb and stopped. I pulled off behind him. He got out of his car, shaking his head. He went to the right rear of his vehicle and just stood there, his arms folded, looking frustrated. I got out of my car and walked up to him. I told him that I couldn't help but notice that he had been driving on a rim. I kept my distance from him at first, just in case he was stoned. But in a clear, soft voice he explained that he had to be somewhere, and he wasn't going to let a flat tire stop him. I asked him where he was going. He said his church. There was a special service that morning, where everyone was going to pray for people in the congregation who needed to be lifted up. I am doing my best to recreate our conversation, and I admit that I do not remember much of it. But I do know that he used those words – lifted up. I asked where his church was, and he gave me a location not far away. I told him I could give him a ride. He broke into a broad grin and thanked me. He said that someone from his church would help him with his car afterwards. They are good people, he told me, and they are always willing to help. They're my family, he told me.

Once we got underway, I asked him why he didn't just call a cab. He said that he tried to, but it was going to take them over thirty minutes to get to his

house and that he would be too late for the service. He had asked one neighbor for help, but that person somewhat coldly said that he didn't have time. The man asked me if I was a Christian and I said yes. The only other thing I remember about our brief trip to his church is that he told me that his wife had died two years before, that as a young guy it would be hard for me to understand, but after being married for over forty years, it is extremely hard to accept that someone who has been the center of your life is gone. Two years is a long time he said, but not when you have lost your wife. Many years later, as a man who has also been married for a few decades, I can now fully appreciate what he said. I do wish I had been more empathetic, that I had offered kind words. I wish that I had asked him about his wife and the things they did together, instead of just nodding and dropping him off in front of his church – which turned out to be a converted warehouse of some sort. It was ugly, but the parking lot was full.

I don't know the man's name. I don't think I ever asked him. But he has stuck with me through all these years. I hope his faith family lifted him up. I hope that he got a new rim and whatever broke in his rear suspension wasn't too expensive to fix. I marvel now at his determination to get to church. I think that God prevented a cop from pulling him over and interrupting his important journey. He was seeking sanctuary under God's hand.

Exodus is the story of the Israelites making their way to the Promised Land. Let's turn to our second Bible passage for today. At the beginning of Chapter 25, Moses has climbed the mountain and is talking to God. God is giving Moses instructions on how to have his people build a sanctuary in which God can reside. The people are to donate gold, silver, bronze, fine cloth and linen, animal hides, lamp oil, spices, incense, and precious stones. The Ark of the Covenant will reside in his sanctuary. Then, God says: *"Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them."* Notice that a beautiful building is going to be constructed. But the real goal is to invite God to live among God's people, to make our society a home for God. And since we are not always in the church building, in truth, God's Sanctuary isn't limited to any physical location. God is available for us anywhere that we welcome God. We build beautiful churches simply to honor God and to give us a relaxing, contemplative environment in which to worship God.

But indeed, there is no place on earth that God's sanctuary does not encompass. That older man – who might have been younger than I am today – wasn't looking for a beautiful, physical sanctuary. He was looking for God's people, because that is the true location of God's sanctuary. We bring it with us wherever we go. But even though it's everywhere, the bad things that happen in

life can make that sanctuary seem elusive. We become broken in spirit. We have to have the determination that that man had. We have to be willing to ride on three tires and a broken rim. We have to leave a crease down the road and throw sparks and parts of our rear suspension up into the air. If you are having trouble finding safety, feeling secure, knowing that you are watched over and protected, remember that you are in control. You just might have to force yourself to remember that God will without a doubt give you shelter – because it is already there, surrounding you. Believe it. Please pray with me.

*God, there are things that we do not have to ask for. One of them is your grace. It burns within us even if we don't know it. It is there, drawing us closer to you. The same is true of your protection, your shelter, your sanctuary. We don't need a church. As a child of God, as a person made in your image, it already surrounds us; it is already within it. There are so many times in life when we feel exposed and raw. We see our parents die. We look at list of bills on a computer screen and have no idea how we will pay them. We are given bad news after a medical test is performed. Hope and security races away from us. The future seems like something so threatening that we are tempted to ask you to hurry up and take us home to you. Please help us feel surrounded by the walls of your sanctuary, protecting us, keeping all evil, fear, and anxiety at bay. Let us live with*

*the hope of a life on earth and an eternal life, both lived in the Kingdom of God.*

*Never let us forget that we are absolutely never alone and never in any danger.*

*On this first Sunday of Advent, when we begin to celebrate the birth of your son, we remember that through the sacrifice of Jesus we have a connection to you that cannot be broken. We are more than protected. We are part of you. We were made in your image and you have a purpose for us. We thank you for not only being within us 24/7, but also giving us the mission of honoring you, glorifying you, and serving you by serving all the children of God and protecting this planet you gave us as the place we stay until our mission on Earth is over. May we always live with grace and with kindness for all.*

*And thank you, God, for this wonderful faith family that surrounds us right now, always ready to help us feel that sanctuary again, should we ever lose contact with it. We come here once a week to feel the literal, physical sight of your church, to be in person in the midst of our congregation, in order to reinforce that knowledge that we are always filled with the Holy Spirit and encompassed by your sanctuary. But most of the week, we are not here. When we leave here today, help us take the presence of your protection and the love of our fellow believers with us. Amen.*