

Psalm 34

Psalm 34—Rejoice Always

The title to this Psalm says David wrote it after he pretended to be insane before the Philistine king of Gath in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David was so fearful of his own King Saul that he sought asylum from his previous worst enemy, the Philistines.

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David and Saul (Photo credit: Wikipedia)[/caption]

Just before going there, David had gone to the priests at Nob seeking food and weapons. That revealed that David was destitute and without food, weapons, or money. That was possibly the most humiliating chapter in David's life as he had to feign madness to keep from being killed by the Philistines. Even though this was a sad, pitiful time in David's life, during it and afterward, David did pray for help, and he was delivered as Psalm 34 makes clear. He may have written this in the cave of Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1), thanking God for saving him from the Philistines and his own King Saul. I think he also wrote this to encourage and teach the 400 outcasts that came under his tutelage beginning in 1 Samuel 22:2. You can break this Psalm down into two parts. Verses 1-10 are David's commitment to praise the Lord and to rejoice in all situations, and verses 11-22 are David's instruction to all the people under his care. There are two important quotations in the New Testament taken from Psalm 34. Peter quoted Ps.34:12-16 in 1 Peter 3:10-12 to reinforce his teaching to the church about brotherly love and forgiveness; and in John 19:36, John quoted from Ps.34:20 as being fulfilled by Jesus at the crucifixion. Even though the soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves crucified with Jesus in order to finish them off, they did not break Jesus' legs.

What Person or Circumstances Take Away Your Joy?

In Psalm 34:1-3, David praised God and invited others to join him in a commitment to praise God at all times. Even after times of hardship, threat of death, and total humiliation, like 1 Samuel 21, David was committed to rejoice and praise God. In many of his letters, the Apostle Paul also emphasized the importance of this such as 1 Thes.5:16, "Rejoice always!", and Phil. 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!" This is more amazing by the fact that Paul wrote Philippians from prison in Rome awaiting trial. If convicted, he would have been executed, but his focus was on what God was doing, as he said in Phil.1:21-24, that if he was executed Christ would be exalted, but if he was released, he would get to continue on in the ministry for the benefit of the church. Either way was a cause for rejoicing for Paul. In the same way, David saw his circumstances, as a poor outcast and fugitive hunted like wild game by Saul, as a reason for praising God.

Considering that both Paul's and David's circumstances were probably worse than ours, we should ask ourselves the question, "What person or circumstances can take away our joy?" Paul and David's answer was no one and nothing. The Lord has a right to our praise, and we need to give it to Him! We need God to be in control even if we temporarily don't understand what is going on or why God is allowing trouble in our lives. We need Paul's attitude that if we die tomorrow God has a better place for us, and He will be exalted in our passing on to heaven. But if we live long and prosperous lives, it is so we can serve Him and glorify Him. Either way is exciting, and a reason to praise God. David said that he would praise God "in my mouth" and "my soul", meaning that he praised God within and without.

David's Testimony

In Psalm 34:4-7, we read David's own testimony about his personal experience. At the lowest point in David's life—he had lost his best friend Jonathon, lost his wife, his home, was a hunted man, he was alone, broke and without food—but David testified that he had experienced deliverance. "This poor man" had nothing, and seemingly was at the low point in his life. How poor was he? He was so poor he couldn't pay attention. Just to rub two nickels together, he'd have to borrow one. We can follow the sequence of events in David's life through verses 4-7. In v.4 we see his "fears" and in v.6 "all his troubles". In v.4 he was seeking the Lord in prayer, and calling Him in v.6. Then, the Lord answered and delivered David in v.4. Then David rejoiced, and therefore he can tell the community that God rescues and protects believers (V.7). Even though David's circumstances as a fugitive did not change, he still praised God for saving him from the Philistines. God had preserved him and protected him.

Discover God's Deliverance Yourself

In Psalm 34:8, David encouraged his followers to "taste and see that the Lord is good". This is the key passage and theme of Psalm 34. We all need to discover or experience the sweet joy of God's protection and deliverance in our lives. David used the image here of a tasty treat that we are eager to put in our mouth. How can we discover God's presence-by the means of believing and acting on that belief. David invites us to step out in faith and experience how truly good God is. David was saying, "I took refuge in the Lord and He protected me, so you should too".

Fear the Lord, v. 9-14

In v.9, David advised the "saints" to fear the Lord, and there would be "no want". Our translation of saints comes from a word meaning holy ones. David is calling all believers saints, because by the grace of God we have been declared holy through His atoning work, and we have received it by faith. The concept of "fear the Lord" is a difficult one for many people. Nevertheless, all the wisdom literature in the Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes emphasizes the fear of the Lord. Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, knowledge...understanding." In order to have a right way of thinking and a correct world view, you must begin with a healthy fear of the Lord. What does David mean by fear? He definitely means respect, awe, devotion, and reverence—but also action. This action will be discussed in Ps.34:13-14 as the righteous lifestyle. Ps 34:10 has a great contrast between the "young lions" and "they who seek the Lord". Even the ruthless wolves and lions of this world (the strong and cunning people) hunger and have a great lack that they can never fill; but believers will be filled of every good thing.

Five Lessons to be Learned in Ps. 34:13-22

In verses 13-14, David advised us to not speak or do evil, but pursue goodness. I paused here and wondered why it is so hard for all of us to avoid lies and slander. I can think of three reasons from personal experience—1. We want to criticize those who threaten, bother, or compete with us, 2. We want to protect ourselves and family, and will do anything for self preservation, 3. We have an intense desire for riches, attention, self promotion, sex, and pleasure. Yet the psalmist is saying that if we just speak the truth and do good we will see that God will reward us.

The next lesson in verses 15-16 is that the Lord honors righteousness. Even though it may seem that God is not aware, "the eyes and ears" of God see and hear everything, and in the end God will honor righteousness and "cut off the memory" of evildoers.

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Thirdly, the Lord hears our prayers in verses 17-18, and eventually the Lord will deliver us. The brokenhearted and those who feel crushed now, will be saved then.

The fourth lesson in verses 19-20, is to remain true to the Lord because He delivers the righteous. This is difficult because, as David says, "many are the afflictions of the righteous". The believing righteous of God may still suffer in this life as David did, but by far the best way to live is the righteous way. The New Testament reinforces this through many passages. Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world". Then in 1 Peter 4:12, Peter told the church, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.."

The fifth lesson is in Ps.34:21-22 to take refuge in the Lord because there is redemption in the Lord, but condemnation for the evil. None who take refuge in the Lord will be eternally condemned.

In conclusion, the troubles of life are expected, but should not overwhelm the people of God; but through prayer God's people will be delivered out of trouble. Through praising God, we remind ourselves and instruct others to live by faith in order to experience the goodness of God.

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