

A PSALM OF THANKSGIVING FOR ALL SEASONS

Psalm 34

Dr. George O. Wood

Psalm 34 harks back to 1 Samuel 21. This psalm is an acrostic psalm. That is, each verse begins with the succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters and, in this particular psalm, the first twenty-one verses each begin with the succeeding letter. Verse 22 is a summary, and does not fit into that chain. The sixth letter of the alphabet is missing. For what reason, we don't know. There are seven psalms in all that do this acrostic. We've looked in length at one—Psalm 25—which has a lot of similarities with Psalm 34. It begins, likewise, with a word of praise, “Unto thee, O LORD, do I lift up my soul. Let me not be ashamed. Let not my enemies triumph over me.” Both Psalm 25 and 34 are acrostic psalms. One of the things that happen when you're dealing with an acrostic psalm is that the outline might not be as tight as a more organized thing. Because you're simply reciting twenty-two qualities and there may not be a close grouping. Although Psalm 34 probably does better than most in providing us clean kinds of break in thought content. A real example of an acrostic where you get like a string of pearls effect, where it's not tightly knit like an engineering model, is Proverbs 31:10 to the end of the chapter, which are the twenty-two traits of the beautiful woman—which is an acrostic of the Book of Proverbs. Sometimes, it doesn't lend itself to organizational unity, in terms of easily segmental content. But on the other hand, to the Hebrew person who knows the Hebrew alphabet, what does an acrostic do? It refreshes your memory. In the Jewish worship, this psalm of thanksgiving would be one when you particularly want to be grateful to God. All you need to do is think through, from A to Z, ways to be grateful to God.

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This psalm particularly, I've called "A Psalm of Thanksgiving for All Seasons." It fits, whether we're in a specific situation, like David, having been delivered from a very dangerous moment in his life. Or, as David says, "I will bless the LORD at all times." It's a wonderful hymn of thanksgiving.

The superscription to the psalm refers to the incident in David's life described in 1 Samuel 21, when he had fled down to Gath. Gath was one of the five major Philistine cities which belonged to the historic enemies of God's people. David had been in Saul's court. Saul had ultimately turned against him. David had met with Jonathan to privately find out if the king's attitude toward him had changed. Jonathan, by overshooting the arrows, indicated that Saul was out to get him. So in the final meeting, after Jonathan dismissed his arrow-bearer, they said good bye. David fled and went to see the high priest Ahimelech, where he got the bread of the Presence and Goliath's sword. With the small band of men with him, he went down to Philistia, where he had "slain his tens of thousands and Saul had slain his thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). When he arrived at the gates of Gath, he realized that they would, of course, know who he was.

1 Samuel 21 says he feigned insanity. He did that by making markings on the gates and letting spittle dribble down his beard, which in the Middle Eastern world was a mark of madness or insanity. The king didn't do anything to David. David went from Gath to the cave of Adullam, where he collected his army and made out of it a great fighting unit, with whom he ultimately came to power. He obviously could have been killed in Gath, had he not had the protection of the Lord, had he not feigned madness and the king been disposed to let him go.

This incident is celebrating his deliverance on that occasion. He does not tell us when specifically the psalm was written, but I think it was likely shortly after his deliverance, maybe

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when he got to the cave of Adullam, that he began to feel this overwhelming sense of thanksgiving to the Lord.

One technical problem needs to be cleared up. If you read 1 Samuel 21, you'll find that the king is referred to, not by the name of "Abimelech," but by the name of "Achish." Abraham had an encounter with an Abimelech. Abimelech was actually the official name of the king, and the king has a dynastic name and a personal name. Just as the word "Pharaoh" is a dynastic name and all the scores and scores were simply called "Pharaoh," but each of them had an individual name. Abimelech is a name that means "God is my father." The dynastic name is used by the psalmist David in Psalm 34, and Achish is used in 1 Samuel 21.

The purpose of David in writing this psalm is to praise the Lord, who had saved him out of all of his troubles, and to invite everybody to join with him in words of gratitude to the Lord. And, in the process of giving gratitude to the Lord, to set forth the lesson that is to be learned: that God has a very special care for His own.

The psalm really, in the first 10 verses, is more in the nature of testimony and in verses 11–22, the last half, it follows more the nature of "here is the lesson to be learned...the teaching value of my experience."

Let's look at the psalm as it easily breaks down.

I. Verses 1–3: a call to magnify the Lord.

"I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together" (Psalm 34:1–3, NIV).

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David has been delivered at a very specific time in his life—at Gath, from Achish. He jumps off of that experience and makes it universal. He says, “I’m not only praising the Lord in this time, but I’m praising Him at all times.” Or, “In every time.”

By this, David is saying to us that there is no time in life when a praise to God should not or cannot be on our lips. This is the theme that Paul picks up in Philippians, when he says “Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). When he reminds us that, with prayers and supplications and thanksgivings, we’re to continually come before the Lord.

At a time when we’re going through difficulty, our praises will center, perhaps not in the event itself, but in the character and the greatness of the God whom we serve. “I will extol the LORD at all times” (Psalm 34:1). Since all believers cannot thank God for the same thing, we have to find a deeper ground of thanksgiving than simply the good things. The deeper ground is what David is stating here: “I will bless the LORD at all times.” That is, what is true about God when I abound and when I’m abased? What is always true? How can I always thank Him? The emphasis is, “I will extol the LORD.” It is a decision that’s made. The praise is not simply generated feelings. It’s a decision. “Bless the Lord at all times.”

Admittedly, there are times in our lives when it is difficult to do this.

The word “bless” in the English has a different meaning than it does in the Hebrew. In the English it usually means “to confer a benefit upon a person” or “to praise that person.” But in the Hebrew, the root idea comes from the word “knee.” So to bless the Lord is connected with the idea of bowing the knee or bending the knee before God. One of the ways to further understand Psalm 33 is to say, “I will bend the knee to God at all times.” That is, “I will surrender to Him and I will invite God to finish the work that He’s doing in my life at this moment, even if it is unpleasant to me. I will bend the knee to the Lord at all times. His praise will always be on my

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lips.” When David has praised the Lord himself, he invites everybody else to join in, because that’s part of what it means to be a community of faith. We do not sing our praises to God alone. We are strengthened. We are encouraged by the praises of other people. That’s why singing together is so important—praising the Lord and having testimonies together. We’re inviting other people to join in with us and to exalt the Lord.

“Glorify the LORD with me. Let us exalt his name together” (verse 3). Or, as the King James says, “magnify.” “Make great” is the literal idea. “Make great the name of the Lord.”

How do we make God great? God is already great without us giving Him any help. There is not a single thing I can add to God. He doesn’t need my advice. He doesn’t need my counsel. He doesn’t need me for any reason other than a need He’s created in himself to desire fellowship with people who voluntarily, from their own heart, worship Him. How can I make Him great when He has all the greatness He will ever need? What is the psalmist saying when he’s encouraging us to worship? “Make great the Lord.” “Magnify the Lord.”

I think what comes out of that, what he’s really saying is that we don’t do anything that changes the character or somehow enhances God himself; but what we do is make Him great in terms of our own awareness of Him. That’s where He needs to be made great. I think one of the things that happen, when we worship together, is that, when there’s a real sense of the vital presence of the Lord, He’s being made great and it’s easy for people to release faith. It’s easier for spiritual gifts to flow. It’s easier for us to just open our hearts to God and be moved—because the Lord is being made great in our midst.

Reading this psalm has made me freshly aware that that’s always the kind of prayer we ought to have whenever we gather together as a body of Christ. We’re praying that, in that service, God would be made great. In some people’s lives, who gather, He’s not present at all. In others, He’s

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present in only a diminished kind of way. Yet it is when He is made great that the inner life gets busted up and broken up and healed and changed before Him. “Make great the Lord.”

When we pray that, we’re asking that we become more aware—our perception of God increases.

“Exalt his name together.”

That’s the call to worship (verses 1–3).

II. Verses 4–10 give us the second part of this psalm, which is David’s personal testimony.

These seven verses give us the specifics of his escape and what he has learned from it in his own experience. “I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears” (Psalm 34:4, NIV). What David is saying is: when we take our fears to God, they have a way of disappearing. He sought the Lord. It was a tough time for him. And maybe he didn’t initially seek the Lord completely. Perhaps if he had sought the Lord more fully, he wouldn’t have gotten Ahimelech the high priest in trouble, which caused his death.

Then he fled to Gath. I wonder if he really prayed for God’s guidance when he went to the Philistines. That seemed like a crazy thing to do, when he had been their enemy. But at one point, he finally comes to himself and he says, “I sought the Lord. I had such fear I’d lose my life.” When we come to God in any crisis in our life, the Lord does act. If we stay in prayer and trust Him implicitly, we’ll come to grips with the irrationalities and the tremendous fears that we cope with in life.

He goes on to say that the Lord not only delivered him from all his fears but “Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame” (Psalm 34:5, NIV). David’s face had been covered with shame—because he had had spittle dripping off of his beard as he feigned madness in Gath. Now he’s saying that, with the Lord’s deliverance, there’s come a whole

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change in his countenance. A radiant face. David is talking about being refreshed in the Lord's presence—it can show on our countenance.

Paul picks up this theme in 2 Corinthians 3, when he talks about looking into the Lord's face and being transformed. "Those who look to him are radiant, their faces are never covered with shame." "This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles" (Psalm 34:6, NIV). That's a process. The New English Bible translates this literally, "Here was a poor wretch who cried to the Lord."

For David, his deliverance was a "this life" deliverance. Sometimes, it could be a "not of this life" deliverance.

C. S. Lewis has a great line in reference to this verse. He said, "Down through the ages, whenever men might need courage, they might cry out, 'Billy Budd, help me!' and nothing very significant happens. But for nineteen hundred years, whenever men have cried out, 'Lord Jesus, help me!' something has happened. This poor man cried and the Lord heard him and delivered him."

Verse 7 notes God's special provision for His people, with protection of angels. "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them" (Psalm 34:7, NIV).

Nobody knows for sure what David's view of "the angel of the lord" is. But David, in his life, only had one angelic encounter and it was a negative one—when he numbered the people. An angel of the Lord brought a visitation of death. That's the only confrontation with an angel he had had in his life. You never find him, like the prophets, having angelic visitations. He has a sense that the Lord has sent special messengers to watch over him.

It's going to be interesting when we get to heaven and find out whether we did have guardian angels. There are evangelical Christians who believe we have special angels assigned to us. The

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Lord talks about “little children” (“Their angels always behold the face of My father who is in heaven,” Matthew 18:10). What does He mean? Some have suggested that He’s talking in terms of the language of an eastern king who has advisors—you have to be pretty important to get close to the king, like being a president’s advisor. Jesus is saying that children are so important that they have counterpart representation in the court of the King of kings. But do we all have a guardian angel? I don’t know if the Scriptures teach that. But the Scriptures certainly do teach that God sends His angels to guard us and to superintend His work in us. To sometimes protect us.

What the Bible is telling us is that we’re not alone in life. We have the Holy Spirit in us. We have angelic beings that, in some way, watch over our life, even if they’re invisible and we do not see them. And we have the Father in heaven, who cares for us; the Son, who intercedes for us. We have an intercessor in the heavens, an intercessor in the heart—helpers that are in the unseen spiritual world. “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him.” Peter in prison—the angel comes and frees him and disappears.

As we go through this—“Taste and see that the LORD is good”—there’s an invitation to experience. “Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Fear the LORD, you, his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” (Psalm 34:8-10, NIV).

How do we understand that? I think what this means is—from God’s perspective on our life—He gives us what we really need. We have to then look at what we think we need and ask, is this a want or a need? Is it something that is in this external realm, rather than in the inward realm of our life? God will not let us lack anything and, in any moment of life, when we need His special strength or presence, He’ll be there to give it to us. David uses this analogy. “The lions,” he says,

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“may grow weak and hungry” (Psalm 34:10, NIV). The young lions, from a theological point of view, epitomized the essence of self-sufficiency in the provision for their own bodily physical needs. In contrast, are those who come to the Lord and are not self-sufficient. David is saying that the person who is self-sufficient—even the young lions—will wind up lacking. But the person who trusts in the Lord will lack no good thing.

I think he’s speaking in an ultimate sense. Not just right now. But in an ultimate sense, when the issues of life are all resolved, the person who has depended upon their own prowess to get and to gain will come up short and empty. Not the person who depends upon the Lord.

That’s his testimony. Now come some lessons.

III. Verses 11–14: a brief lesson on the godly life.

“Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD [That is part of, in the Old Testament, what’s called “wisdom literature”]” (Psalm 34:11, NIV). What is the first step in gaining the wisdom of the Lord? It’s “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10). “Fear” means “awe and reverence” and respect.” A fundamental respect for life.

Revelation 6 presents a fascinating picture in the opening of the sixth seal. The generals and rich and powerful men on earth cry out for the rocks and hills to fall upon them and to kill them, because they are afraid of the wrath of the lamb. What that picture is telling us is that the most fundamental fear within the human heart is not the fear of death. That’s where so much of our contemporary culture is mistaken. People are afraid of death. But the Bible says that the most fundamental human fear is the fear of meeting God personally, and being unprepared to meet Him. So when people see God clearly and they’re not prepared, they would choose death.

They’re less afraid of death than of meeting God unprepared.

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It's not hard to understand when you come back to the psalmist to find this phrase "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." "Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:12–14, NIV). That, in a nutshell, is the Book of James. If you want to live a tranquil life, a life that has stabilized relationships—that's the idea of living a long life—then watch what you say and watch what you do. Relationships are corroded through bad things we say to one another and through negative language that streams out of our lips. And through wrong deeds that reflect wrong intents of heart. Good godly advice: verses 11–14.

IV. Then another thing that David would teach is God's care of His own.

These verses talk about God's care for us. "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles [That's why we love the psalms—they speak so authentically to our experience]. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken. Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned. The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him" (Psalm 34:15–22, NIV).

Verses 17–18 indicate that we, as God's people, might be brokenhearted and spiritually crushed and have many afflictions. But God's presence will be experienced within these crises. God's protection for us in those crisis situations is beautifully seen when we're given the promise of verse 20, "He protects all his bones. Not one of them will be broken." Immediately, we recognize that as cropping up in the New Testament, with Jesus on the cross (John 19). That may have been

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a psalm which the Lord could have meditated on when he was on the cross. We know He was deeply praying and meditating on Psalm 22 while He was on the cross. But Psalm 34 was perhaps part as well. The Lord did not deliver Him, as David was delivered. David was delivered out of Gath. But Jesus, praying the same prayer, was not delivered out of physical death. Yet was He not delivered in the ultimate and Easter sense?

“Not a bone will be broken.” In the Near Eastern way of looking at things, the bones form the basic structure of life. If you break your back, you’re in a lot of trouble. You can’t function with a broken back. You might be able to function with a broken finger. But your frame cannot be broken. There are a lot of things that could go wrong with you, but if your frame gets broken, which is the essence of your structure, then you’re in a lot of trouble.

What the psalmist was saying is that the essential self that we place in God’s hand will stand the shock of battle. The Christian may bear the scars—superficial scars—that come in the battles of life. But basically, the person who puts his trust in the Lord will emerge through life structurally sound. God will redeem his life. In the Lord’s case, it came as a literal prophecy. “Not a bone of him shall be broken.” I think for many of us it can be used in a spiritual sense—not simply literal—the skeleton upon which all my spiritual life rests will always be kept intact by the Lord. I think there’s a spiritual meaning to what is said here that we can apply us. This may not only be a reference to Christ, but to us. He will protect us and deliver us.

Evil will slay the wicked. We think of God as slaying the wicked and God does. But how does God do that? He lets the person be trapped in their own devices. Sooner or later, they’re going to make a mess out of what they’re doing. Evil will slay the wicked.

But the Lord redeems His servants. No one who takes refuge in Him will be condemned.

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A great way to end this psalm—by speaking of redemption and not being condemned. The Lord redeems us. I think we've lost the texture of the word "redemption." We don't redeem people anymore. We obviously don't have the slave market anymore. We don't redeem people. And generally, because there are very few pawn shops, you can redeem something in a pawn shop. But not many use pawn shops anymore. We used to have stamps where you could redeem something. But the stores phased all that out. Where do we get, in our culture, the experience of redeeming something? It's become a lost word as to what it means.

Scriptures use that word to describe us in our human condition. We are captive to a hostile and evil power, and we have no good fate awaiting us. But the Lord has come to redeem us. To buy us back for himself.

David only knows a smattering of redemption. But we, who have seen David's Son and know David's Son, know the greater redemption that has been offered to us in Christ. God is present in life to save us, so why shouldn't we do what David says? "I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together." (Psalm 34:1–3, NIV).

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we thank You for this Your Word. A word which gives us a psalm of thanksgiving for all seasons in life. Thank You, Lord, for redeeming us. Maybe we haven't thought of that today. But here You've brought it to our mind once more. You are the Lord of life who redeems us. We want to thank You for all the dangerous places You've brought us through and out of. Like David at Gath. Thank You for the special deliverances You've given us and thank You most for the spiritual deliverance You've given us—that You have brought us from death unto life. You've brought us from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God. You've put our feet on a

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sure place and we thank You. We'll bless You. We will glorify Your name. Bless us, Lord, as we go into the rest of this Christmas season. All of the family that we may be in touch with, friends—we pray that You would be glorified in their lives at this time of the year. We pray for family members that might be going through a lot of hurt in their lives, we pray that we might be an agent of Your healing and Your life, that You'd reach into their life through our witness and example and touch them. Bring them to Yourself. We glorify You in our life. We thank You. We praise You at all times. We rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4). We want to do that from our heart. Because You're real to us, at whatever time and season we are in in our life. Bless Your people tonight. Thank You for these moments we've had to share together. Through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.