

Reflections on Psalm 34

Introduction

In our reflections on the past two psalms (Ps. 24 and 32) we have speculated concerning the probable context in David's life from which he wrote; in Psalm 34 we are told explicitly. The inspired title (the superscription which is part of the Hebrew text) reads: "of David; when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who drove him away and he departed." We know the story behind Psalm 34. It is given to us in **1 Samuel 21:10-15** (*read it again*).

David, who has been anointed the next king by Samuel, is a fugitive on the run for his life. He has been declared an enemy and an outlaw by the reigning King Saul. Saul has been rejected by the Lord but seeks to hang on to his kingdom, and to eliminate his would-be replacement David. Saul's murderous intentions have been made clear (1 Sam. 20) and David must flee in haste alone and with only the clothes on his back. Where might he go? After a brief stop at the tabernacle in Nob to pick up some bread and a sword (Goliath's sword—what might that have meant to David?), he then flees to the Philistine city of Gath. You heard it right, a Philistine city—David's and Israel's arch-enemies! Desperate times call for desperate measures, and they become more desperate for David. He is recognized as the greater slayer of the Philistines (did his sword give him away? Gath was the hometown of Goliath!). What is David to do? David was greatly afraid, so he pretended to be insane and the king drove him away as a madman. David was enabled to escape and to continue evading King Saul.

We might be inclined to think how clever or lucky David was to escape a seemingly impossible situation. Or maybe we think David was faithless, relying on his own ingenuity, and should be embarrassed by such behavior. David thought otherwise. It was not his cleverness, luck or self-reliance that achieved his escape, but the Lord who delivered him. This is what he both celebrates and teaches in Psalm 34.

Interestingly, besides this psalm, David wrote another psalm recounting this same experience of being seized by the Philistines—**Psalm 56**. *Take a moment and read this psalm first*. In Psalm 56, David recounts his feelings and trust in the Lord during this event. No doubt, he was afraid, but the refrain of the psalm is:

When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.
In God, whose word I praise,
In God I have put my trust;
I shall not be afraid.
What can *mere* man do to me?

He credits God with delivering his life from death (v.13). He vows to praise the Lord (in the congregation) for what He has done; a vow which is binding on David. In some sense, Psalm 34 is a fulfillment of this vow. He not only praises God in the congregation, but writes it down to be enjoyed and echoed by believers through the ages. If Psalm 56 recounts David's feelings during this event, Psalm 34 focuses on the outcome of this event and what it teaches us about the Lord's goodness.

Read Psalm 34:1-22

While Psalm 34 has some elements of a psalm of praise, it is more often characterized as a "wisdom" psalm. It has many characteristics similar to the wisdom literature of Proverbs. The psalmist takes the stance of a teacher speaking to a learner, and employs many proverb-type phrases in his instruction. David is not only praising God and calling us to praise God with him, but he is teaching us about the fear of the Lord, which he has learned from his own deliverance. *A fun fact:* Psalm 34 is written in the form of an acrostic, each verse beginning with the subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet. David thought through his deliverance thoroughly, as it were from A to Z (or in this case, Aleph to Tav—22 letters). This type of structure tells us that the psalms were not mere extemporaneous expressions of praise, but careful, thoughtful, well-crafted lyrics (*try it sometime with the English alphabet*). This was part of the skill of the psalmist that often marks wisdom psalms. The "fool" (insane) David wrote a most sane meditation on Yahweh's deliverance!

Let's look at the Psalm under its two main movements:

1. David's testimony and call for the congregation to join him in praise of God (v. 1-10)

The first half of the psalm alternates between personal testimony and repeated calls to join in the praise and be stimulated to fresh faith. The initial part of David's testimony consisting of *boasting*: "In Yahweh my soul makes its boast." He intends for this boasting and praise to be constant and ongoing ("all times," "continually"), encouraging to the afflicted and joined in by all believers. Here is David's clear call for the congregation to join him in his praise of God. As we have seen repeatedly in the psalms, praise is never a private affair. It is a public, vocal declaration of the goodness of God and His deliverance in the midst of the congregation. Praise by its very nature demands others to join in. "Praise cannot be content to be solitary: it craves company. Praise is always covetous for more praise. It tries to be infectious. It's always after a *fellowship of praise*" (Dale Ralph Davis).

David's testimony also includes remembering. He reports what Yahweh did for him in Gath of the Philistines—He “delivered me from all my fears” and “saved him out of all his troubles.” David's escape was not ultimately due to his cleverness; he takes no credit. He was weak, helpless and afraid, but cried to the Lord who rescued him. But this is true not simply for David; he draws implications from his experience for all believers. One implication is that His people enjoy Yahweh's protection: “The Angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.” In all their sojourning God's people have Yahweh camping around them. This is not occasional or fleeting but what he does continuously. Another implication is that Yahweh's servants enjoy his provision. Young lions may hunger, “but they who seek Yahweh shall not be in want of any good thing” (remember Psalm 23:1). Whatever is good for us God will see that we have it.

David invites us to “taste and see that Yahweh is good.” In the midst of a world of gods who were not good at all, there is one God and He is altogether good. He will not leave a bitter taste in one's mouth; He will not disappoint. Our faces will never be ashamed for trusting in Him, but will be radiant and transformed.

2. Instructions in the way of the righteous and the way of Yahweh (v. 11-22)

In the second half of the psalm David turns to give instruction. He takes on the role of a wisdom teacher addressing the young people who are in his charge. As in Proverbs, his first topic is the “fear of the Lord.” David has just celebrated God's protection and provision for those who fear Him, and called the saints anew to “fear Yahweh.” So now he gives instructions in the fear of Yahweh. In the Old Testament this is almost a stock phrase for “faithful biblical religion.” It is grounded in a reverence and knowledge of Yahweh that is displayed in a righteous way of life. It is usually accompanied with a long life that is filled with good. This righteous way of life is here characterized by (1) control of your speech; (2) the transformed direction of your life; (3) your pursuit of peace. These are a few of the marks of piety in the Old Testament. A fear of Yahweh shows up in the integrity of our speech, the godly direction of our living, and a lack of rancor in our relationships with others.

David moves from instruction in the way of the righteous to instruction in the way of the Lord. What is the connection between the two? It is precisely this type of person, one who is marked by these characteristics (i.e. “the righteous”), that the Lord hears and delivers from trouble. These are some the sweetest verses in all the Bible on the Lord's nearness to His suffering people. David refers to the eyes, ears and face of Yahweh. It's as if Yahweh bends His whole being to His people's welfare. It's his way of expressing the attention and care Yahweh has for His people. In a sobering contrast, the Lord also notices the wicked, but they are not met with

His smiling face but His frown of judgment...He is against them! On the other hand, He is ever-near to save those who are brokenhearted and crushed in spirit. David knows that God's people are often afflicted and crushed in spirit; we are not exempted from life's trials and pains ("many are the afflictions of the righteous" v.19 – David speaks from experience!). Yet strong assurance meets this sober realism—"Yahweh delivers us out of them all."

What ties the two halves of the psalm together (David's testimony and David's instruction) is the theme of God's deliverance of the righteous "from all" ("from all my fears" v.4; "from all his troubles" v. 6; "from all their troubles" v.17; "from all of them" (afflictions) v.19). He even keeps "all" his bones! How can this be? Do these assurances promise too much? Perhaps the answer is ultimately found in the closing verses that speak of the final standing of Yahweh's servants in contrast with the wicked. The verb here has the idea of being held guilty or condemned. Those who hate the righteous (a characteristic of the wicked) will finally be condemned. But the opposite of condemnation is justification (remember Romans!), and this is what Yahweh's servants are promised. This is the highest blessing and sweetest deliverance for all those who take refuge in Yahweh!

Pastor Mark

Questions for Reflection:

- How do we reconcile David's behavior in 1 Sam. 21:10-15 and his trust in the Lord and his claim that Yahweh delivered him? How might we apply this today in our efforts to stay safe from the coronavirus?
- Why do you think praise by its very nature call others to join in? Consider this quote from C.S. Lewis; how does it relate to our praise of God?
I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.
- **Read 1 Peter 3:8-12.** How does Peter apply Psalm 34 to Christian living? How is this part of keeping our behavior excellent among the Gentiles (1 Pet. 2:12)? How might this apply in today's context?
- The promises of Psalm 34 may seem unrealistic; how is the psalm ultimately about Jesus? (hint: read John 19:31-36) How are the promises of Psalm 34 ultimately true for us "in Christ?"