



Psalm 34 - Praise for Deliverance from Trouble

Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.

Introduction

This psalm is an expression of thanksgiving for God's protection and care for those who trust in him. There is also a 'wisdom' section embedded in the thanksgiving (vv.11-14); it is appropriate, because it is the 'wise', i.e. those who live out their trust in God, who have occasion to give such thanks. This psalm is acrostic, each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Like other Davidic acrostics, Psalm 34 is imperfect: the w-verse is missing between vv.5-6, and the last verse begins with p, as confirmed by Psalm 25:22.

The title connects the psalm to 1 Samuel 21:10-15, where David is delivered from danger by feigning madness in the presence of King Achish of Gath. Probably the name Abimelech in the psalm is a title or alternate name for the king of Gath. This was a narrow escape, and David does not take credit for it; nor does he deny the importance of the faithful using their wits in desperate situations.

Psalm 34:1-3 - Join Me in Blessing the Lord.

After announcing his intention to bless the Lord at all times, the singer invites all the humble to join him in song. Behind this lies the idea that the ideal praise to God is his assembled people joining their voices in thanking him. The idea behind 'bless' is to speak a good word about someone: when God blesses someone, e.g. as in Psalm 29:11, he speaks a good word over that person for their well-being; when a human blesses God, as in Psalm 26:12, he speaks a good word about God's kindness and generosity, as does Paul: <<***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love***>> (Ephesians 1:3-4). To

magnify the Lord is to tell how great he is: <<*And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord'*>> (Luke 1:46).

- 1 I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
- 2 My soul makes its boast in the Lord;
let the humble hear and be glad.
- 3 O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together.

Psalm 34:1-3

I will bless the Lord at all times. Given the title of this psalm and its historical setting, we see David triumphant and relieved at God's rescue when he was held by the Philistines, as recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-22:1. Paul adopted this principle in his own life and encouraged others to follow: <<*Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Ephesians 5:18-20), and: <<*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

My soul makes its boast in the Lord. David might have boasted in himself. The account in 1 Samuel describes how David cleverly won his freedom by pretending madness, but knew that the working of the thing was due to God, not his own cleverness. Yet in a sense, David had little to boast of from a human perspective. He had to humiliate himself like a madman to escape the Philistines, whom he had foolishly sought refuge among, even bringing Goliath's sword with him to Gath! All he could really do was to boast of what God had done for him: <<*In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name for ever*>> (Psalm 44:8), and: <<*He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'*>> (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

Let the humble hear and be glad. David won his freedom by a radical display of humility. Other humble people would be glad to hear how God blessed and rewarded David's humility. It is significant that he calls the people of God in general the humble. It is as if being proud were a denial of God himself and, in a sense, it is.

O magnify the Lord with me. David knew there was something magnetic about the true praise of God. When one genuinely praises God, he or she wants to draw others into the practice of praise. If it is good for one to exalt his name, then it is even better to do it together with his people. David thought praising God was to magnify God, that is, to make him larger in one's perception. Magnification does not actually make an object bigger; no one can make God bigger. However, to magnify something or someone is to perceive it as being bigger, and one must do that regarding the Lord God.

Psalm 34:4-7 - He Answered My Prayers.

The psalmist now moves to specific instances of God's kindness: he sought the Lord for help and he cried in his distress, and God rescued him from the things he feared.

- 4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
- 5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
- 6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,
and was saved from every trouble.
- 7 The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

Psalm 34:4-7

I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. David's simple testimony is still powerful thousands of years later. David sought the Lord, looked to him in loving trust. God then heard his servant, with the implication that he heard him with love, sympathy, and action. God responded when he delivered David from all his fears. Commentators are divided as to if David sinned when he feigned madness among the Philistines, or if he was obedient and guided by God. Morgan observed, "There does seem to be incongruity between David feigning madness to save his life, and this exalted outpouring of praise to God as the Great Deliverer."

Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. In moving from 'I' to 'they,' David indicates that this experience was not his alone. Many others have known and will know what it is to set the focus of their loving trust upon God and receive his help.

And be radiant. The idea is that they draw something from God's own glory and radiance. Later, the apostle Paul would explain much the same thought: <<*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit*>> (2 Corinthians 3:18). This radiance is some evidence that one has truly looked to him.

So your faces shall never be ashamed. David also knew that God would never forsake the one who trusts in him: <<*Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous*>> (Psalm 25:3). God would give them confidence in the moment and vindication in time.

This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord. David again emphasised his personal experience of these truths. He was the one. He was the poor man who cried out to God, and God graciously answered, reflecting that:

- A cry is short, and not sweet.
- A cry is brief, and bitter.
- A cry is the language of pain.
- A cry is a natural production.
- A cry has much meaning and no music.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. David narrowly escaped death among the Philistines. He was still a hunted, wanted man with King Saul determined to kill him. A rag-tag group of desperate losers gathered to him at the cave of Adullam. David was at a genuine low point, yet he was still filled with praise and trust, even knowing that God had an angelic camp all around him. David's protection is real, even if it was invisible. He could not see the angelic presence around him, but it was real. Many times in the OT, the angel of the Lord is an actual material appearance of Yahweh himself, or some believe a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, as in Judges Chapter 13 and several other places. It is not known if David meant that it is an angelic being sent by God, or God himself present with the believer. Both are true.

Psalm 34:8-14 - Therefore Fear the Lord with Me.

Now that the song has mentioned the humble (v.2) and those who fear the Lord (v.7), it moves on to encourage all who sing it to fear the Lord (v.9), i.e. to revere him; and it seeks to teach them what it means to fear him (vv.11-14). The verb taste (v.8), which in the OT is commonly used in the literal sense, is a metaphor for personal experience; the NT uses the metaphor widely, as in: <<*The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, "Whoever keeps my word will never taste death"'*>> (John 8:52), <<*but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of*

death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone>> (Hebrews 2:9), and: <<For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt>> (Hebrews 6:4-6).

The holy ones or saints (v.9) are those whom God has consecrated to himself, namely, his people. They should live holy lives in response to his kindness: <<*Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am the Lord your God. Keep my statutes, and observe them; I am the Lord; I sanctify you>> (Leviticus 20:7-8). Observe how the holy life is distinguished by dealing well with others (vv.13-14). First Peter uses texts from this section: <<*if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good>> (1 Peter 2:3), where ‘the Lord’ is Jesus; 1 Peter 3:10-12 uses vv.12-16 to summarise the ideal behaviour and lifestyle for Christians.**

- 8 O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
- 9 O fear the Lord, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
- 10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

Psalm 34:8-10

O taste and see that the Lord is good. After telling of his own experience, David challenged the reader or singer of this psalm to experience God’s goodness for himself or herself. It could only come through a personal encounter, in some ways similar to taste or to see. Taste and sight are physical senses, ways in which people interact with the material world. In some ways, faith is like a spiritual sense, and with it a believer interacts with the spiritual world. In this sense to taste and to see are like trusting God, loving him, seeking him, looking to him.

Happy are those who take refuge in him. David was sure that the one who did taste and see, or who trusted in God, would not be forsaken. God would make him blessed.

O fear the Lord, you his holy ones. David thought to fear the Lord was much like trusting him and experiencing his goodness. This fear is the proper reverence and respect that man has for deity: <<*The Lord your God you shall fear; him you*

shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear>> (Deuteronomy 6:13), and: <<*He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgement has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water'*>> (Revelation 14:7). If a person really experiences God's goodness, if they really experience the blessedness of trusting him, they will also have an appropriate fear of the Lord.

His holy ones are also referred to as his saints: <<*Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily*>> (Psalm 31:23), <<*The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised*>> (Matthew 27:52), <<*To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Romans 1:7), <<*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours*>> (1 Corinthians 1:2), and: <<*Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*>> (Jude 3).

For those who fear him have no want; those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Even one as strong as the young lions suffer want and hunger; but David testified of God's greater provision. David experienced a good thing from God in his deliverance among the Philistines. He knew it was a good thing not due to his own strength or might; it was the goodness of God extended to those who seek the Lord.

- 11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
- 12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
- 13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
- 14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.

Psalm 34:11-14

Come, O children, listen to me. Following David's deliverance through feigned madness among the Philistines, many who were in distress, in debt, or in discontent gathered to him at the cave of Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1-2). It is reasonable to think that David taught these men his own recent lessons of faith, including the fear of the Lord.

Which of you desires life? David taught his unusual group of followers that one must do to see God's blessing in this life, i.e. to live in the fear of the Lord.

Covets many days to enjoy good. David's instruction of his men at the cave of Adullam was very much in light of the Old Covenant, by which he and the rest of Israel related to God. Under the New Covenant God's blessing is in Jesus Christ and received by faith and not by works or obedience, although both should manifest themselves from faith: <<*Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another*>> (Titus 3:1-3).

Keep your tongue from evil: David taught his men, rough as they were, that they should not speak evil: <<*So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell*>> (James 3:5-6).

And your lips from speaking deceit: David taught them that a particular form of evil to avoid is that of lying and deceit.

Depart from evil and do good: David spoke to his men about simply directing the life away from evil and to do good: <<*Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God*>> (3 John 11).

Seek peace and pursue it: David taught his men to not only think in terms of war and battles, but in terms of peace, and the pursuit of it. Peace with God and among men should be sought: <<*Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification*>> (Romans 14:19).

Psalm 34:15-22 - The Lord Cares for Those Who Trust Him.

The final section speaks generally about how the Lord cares for his faithful ones, i.e. it does not recount specific instances as vv.4-7 do. There is also a stress here on the difference between the way God treats the faithful and the wicked.

The Hebrew expressions broken-hearted and crushed in spirit in v.18 refer to the pride and stubbornness in one's heart being humbled, as confirmed in Psalms 51:17, 69:20 and 147:3. The psalm is clear that both the righteous and the wicked will have afflictions, refer to the repetition in v.19 and v.21; the difference is in the outcomes: none condemned in v.22; and those condemned in v.21.

It is possible that John 19:36 has combined: <<*He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken*>> (v.20) with: <<*It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the animal outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones*>> (Exodus 12:46), to emphasise that Jesus was not only the Passover Lamb but also a righteous sufferer whom God would vindicate.

15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.

16 The face of the Lord is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

Psalm 34:15-16

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous. David continued to instruct his men, teaching them about the watchful eye and attentive ear of God upon his people: <<*He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them for ever, and they are exalted*>> (Job 36:7), <<*Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name*>> (Malachi 3:16), and: <<*We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will*>> (John 9:31). This was another aspect of reward to those who lived the obedience described in vv.13-14.

The face of the Lord is against evildoers. It was important for David's men to also know that, particularly under the Old Covenant, there were not only blessings on obedience, but curses upon disobedience, such as: <<*If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people*>> (Leviticus 17:10). Those stuck in their evil and rebellion could find their remembrance gone from the earth: <<*Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven'*>> (Exodus 17:14), and: <<*The enemies have vanished in everlasting ruins; their cities you have rooted out; the very memory of them has perished*>> (Psalm 9:6).

17 When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.

18 The Lord is near to the broken-hearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:17-18

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears. David reminded his men at the cave of Adullam that, again, especially under the Old Covenant, God's attentive care is upon the righteous: <<*He fulfils the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them*>> (Psalm 145:19). David's testimony was that God had delivered him out of all his troubles.

The Lord is near to the broken-hearted. This teaching from David was wonderful for the men at the cave of Adullam to hear. They, being in debt, distressed, and discontent, were likely those with a broken heart and a crushed or contrite spirit. They were objects of God's favour and salvation, not his scorn: <<*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners*>> (Isaiah 61:1).

19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord rescues them from them all.

20 He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.

21 Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.

22 The Lord redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Psalm 34:19-22

Many are the afflictions of the righteous. David spoke from his own experience to his men at the cave of Adullam. Although he was relatively young, he had still suffered many afflictions, and had done so as a righteous man.

But the Lord rescues them from them all. This was the principle that answered the previous statement. Indeed, the righteous had many afflictions; yet God's

deliverance was real in David's life and in the experience of many of God's people: <<*He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no harm shall touch you*>> (Job 5:19), and: <<*Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them*>> (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken. David could look at his own body and see that, although he had endured many battles, accidents, and hardships, yet not one bone was broken.

According to the Gospel of John, David spoke not only of his own experience. He also spoke prophetically of the Messiah to come, Jesus Christ. John explained that the Roman soldiers who had supervised the crucifixion of Jesus came to his body on the Cross, expecting to hasten and guarantee his death in the traditional way, breaking the legs of the crucified victim. When they looked carefully, they learned that Jesus was already dead and they pierced his side to confirm it. John wrote: <<*These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken'*>> (John 19:36). As commented on in the section introduction, it was a requirement that the bones of the Paschal Lamb, the Passover meal, should not be broken.

Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. David had confidence in more than the rescue of the righteous. He was also confident that the wicked and those who hate would be judged: <<*The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing*>> (Psalm 112:10), and: <<*The wicked are overthrown by their evildoing, but the righteous find a refuge in their integrity*>> (Proverbs 14:32).

The Lord redeems the life of his servants. This was the primary purpose for Jesus' substitutionary death on the Cross: <<*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them*>> (Luke 1:68), <<*and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth*>> (Revelation 14:3).

None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. David could proclaim that God would rescue the soul of his servants, and they would be found in a place outside God's condemnation. Many centuries later the apostle Paul would write: <<*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*>> (Romans 8:1). Even under the Old Covenant, David knew something of this freedom from condemnation.