**Praise and fear the Lord** 12/5/24

Read: 1Samuel 21, Psalm 34

Text: Psalm 34

Psalms: 111,1, 113, 134a

Many of the psalms come with a title; Psalm 34 is one such psalm. But it is one of a few psalms with a title that includes more than just the writers name and instructions for the musician. The title of Psalm 34 tells us the circumstances under which it was written. This is a great help in understanding the psalm; not that we are to confine the words to this particular historical situation. David was a man just like us. He experienced troubles and difficulties in life just like us, so we can learn from this psalm how to cope, and indeed how to be conquerors in the midst of troubles that come our way.

Nowhere in the psalms, and nowhere in the Bible, will you find God promising a life free of troubles and afflictions. Jesus said, ‘in this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). In this psalm, David teaches the same truth; he teaches us how to overcome difficulties and suffering no matter how severe or desperate. This teaching needs to be heard today more than ever. David was not delivered by guns, by drugs, by doctors, by politicians or friends; he was delivered by the Lord.

We will look at this psalm as one of the wisdom psalms. It has parallels with Psalm 1, seen only in the second half of the psalm. The first half is more of a thanksgiving related to the Lord delivering David from the hand of a Philistine king. Spurgeon refers to the first half as a ‘hymn’, and the second as a ‘sermon’. David was always keen to teach others what he learnt in his walk with the Lord, although it was his son Solomon who was particularly blessed by God with wisdom, and who wrote many proverbs. Even in the first half of this psalm, David calls upon people to join him in praising the Lord; he did not rejoice alone or in silence. ‘Corporate worship is one of the natural instincts of the new life of Christ in God’s people’ writes Boice.

**1. Thanksgiving, testimony, and taste**

Firstly, thanksgiving. David was a shepherd boy when he got involved in Israel’s war against the Philistines. Trusting in the Lord, he killed the Philistine giant, giving victory to Israel. David was praised and honoured by all the people, except King Saul. Even the King’s son, Jonathan, loved David, but in the end, because of Saul’s violence, David had to flee the country. Alone and empty handed, David fled across the border into Philistine territory. He took some holy bread and the sword of Goliath from the priest of Nob (1Sam 21) but was still a ‘poor man’ (34:6).

The Philistine king recognised David as the popular king of Israel. David’s own king wanted to kill him, and now this enemy king was about to kill him- so David thought. To save his neck David pretended to be mad, scratching on doors and dribbling saliva down his beard. The king threw David out, as the title of this psalm states, and he went to stay in the cave at Adullam (1Sam 22:1). He probably wrote this psalm shortly afterwards, maybe addressing it to the four hundred or so discontents who came to join him. David had done nothing wrong, yet Saul was trying to kill him. We can only imagine David’s state of mind, his fears, his questions and his prayers. Yet this psalm is one of thanksgiving for deliverance from death- the first of many.

‘I will bless the Lord at all times’ (34:1). David **wills** to bless and praise the Lord; it is not just a feeling or emotion. Under the circumstances he could have been questioning the Lord like Job, or even accusing Him of allowing him to suffer unjustly. Sure, he had escaped death, but he had done nothing wrong in the first place. But he willed to praise the Lord continually, and to let others know how he trusted the Lord and was thankful. Imagine the impact this psalm would have had upon the discontented men who rallied around him. He called them to exalt the name of the Lord with him. He calls you and me today to stand up, and stand together, in giving all praise and glory to the Lord, even in the midst of trials and suffering. How can we do this? Listen to what else David has to say in this psalm.

Following this short word of praise, David testifies of how the Lord answered his prayer and delivered him from the sword of two kings. He sought the Lord, the Lord heard him, and the Lord delivered him. The Lord took away the fear in his heart and replaced it with joy. Everyone could see this joy in his heart because he was radiant with joy (34:5). The Lord never fails to answer our prayers, and if we really listen to his answer we will also be radiating the joy of the Lord in our life. We will be praising the Lord, just like David.

I should have noted that this psalm is an acrostic (irregular), meaning each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This poetic feature constrains the writer somewhat, but also sharpens his focus. This psalms also contains parallelisms, another characteristic of Hebrew poetry. In this testimony section (vs 4-7) we have a parallelism across two verses, with verses 6-7 forming a parallelism with the previous two verses. In verse 4 David sought the Lord and he heard him, and delivered him from his fears; in verse 6 ‘this poor man cried and the Lord heard him, and saved out of all his troubles’. David speaks of himself as a poor man, which he was at this point in his life.

David speaks of earnestly seeking the Lord, not some casual, passing prayer. The threat of death or intense suffering is certain to focus our prayers- and still we wonder why the Lord allows us to suffer! David uses the title, ‘Lord’ in almost every verse of this psalm. ‘Yahweh’, translated ‘LORD’, was the covenant name of God. David was not vague in his prayer or his thanksgiving. He was not praying to ‘whatever gods there be’. We should not be vague either; we should use the name of Jesus in our prayers and not be praying ‘in your name’.

In verse 7 David refers to the ‘angel of the Lord’. While there are angels who are God’s messengers, the ‘angel of the Lord’ usually refers to the Lord himself appearing- in a theophany or Christophany. When the king of Syria sent his army to capture Elisha in Dothan, Elisha’s servant was scared. Elisha told him not to fear but to look and see the horses and chariots of fire on the mountains (2Kings 6:17). Elisha prayed and the Lord struck the Syrian soldiers with blindness. This is a picture of the angel of the Lord encamping around those who fear him (34:7). The Lord surrounds his people individually and collectively, guarding us from dangers, some of which we do not even know about. The Lord watches over our going out and our coming in (Psalm 121:8). His eyes are on the righteous always (34:15).

Thirdly, in this first half of the psalm, David calls upon those with him to not only praise the Lord but to taste for themselves that the Lord is good (34:8). The early church linked this sensory phenomenon to the Lord’s Supper, the ‘tasting’ of bread and wine. There is nothing to suggest such a link, but the call to ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ is a powerful metaphor. If you have had anything to with feeding little children, you will have contemplated the proverb: ‘you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink’. You can drag people to church and prod them to praise the Lord, but what you want is for them to ‘taste’ the goodness of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Have you ‘tasted’ the goodness of God? Are you feeding upon the Lord in your heart by faith? Are you in Christ, and is Christ in you? The apostle Paul speaks of being ‘in Christ’: ‘if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation’ (2Cor 5:17). This is what it means to ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’.

In the parallel verse David writes, ‘Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints’ (34:9). To taste the Lord is to fear the Lord. Fear is often reduced to reverence. Reverence is there of course, but it is reverence for a Father, not just a King - the Lord is King and our Father. When you fear your father you obey him- right? To fear the Lord means to obey the Lord, to trust and obey the Lord in every aspect of your life. You cannot just give the Lord a nod of acknowledgement from time to time or throw a few dollars his way when you feel guilty. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This is the essence of wisdom as set forth in the Bible.

David confidently asserts that if you really and truly trust the Lord, and obey him, you will not lack any good thing (34:9, 10). God feeds the lions, but they may hunger. But God will never let you lack for anything that is good for you. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus teaches that if God feeds the birds, how much more will he provide for you who are his beloved child (Mat 6:26). God gave his only begotten Son to die on the cross in order to save you from sin and death, so he will not let you suffer beyond what you are able to bear (1Cor 10:13). He loves you with a steadfast, covenant love, a love-bond that cannot be broken. David knew that love; do you?

**2. Teach wisdom**

a. fear of the Lord

In the second half of the psalm David invites his listeners to come and he will teach them the fear of the Lord (34:11). Have you ever taken a subject with the title, ‘The fear of the Lord’? It was not there in my time at university; it was not even there in the seminary. But this is what David wants to teach us today. He addresses us children- not his children but children of the Lord. David was only a young man at this time (assuming he wrote soon after his escape) but he was mature in the Lord. He had learnt what it means to fear the Lord and wanted to teach others. The apostle Peter accepted David’s invitation- he quotes verses 12-16 from this psalm in his first letter (1Peter 3:10-12). Peter was urging believers to be of one mind and to love one another in the Lord; bless one another and you will be blessed. The fear of the Lord leads to life, a life of rich and rewarding blessings.

It was said in a eulogy, ‘I never heard Brian speak a bad word about anyone, and I never heard anyone speak a bad word about him’. A wise person is a person who controls their tongue. ‘Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies’ (34:13). If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, departing from evil and doing good is the end or outcome. Doing good means seeking peace (34:14). The apostle Paul, like the apostle Peter, listened to David’s teaching; he wrote, ‘Let us pursue the things that make for peace’ and, ‘live peaceably with all men’ (Rom 14:19, 12:18). Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God’ (Mat 5:9). What a different world this would be if seeking peace came before seeking revenge and personal gain. Would your life be different if you spent more time seeking peace?

b. face of the Lord

Wisdom says to do good and seek peace, and you will be blessed, not because of some natural law but because of the Lord. The Lord is watching, and he will reward you for your actions- people may well hurt you for doing good, as in David’s case. His eyes are open, and his ears are open to the righteous (34:15). Note the wisdom language- the ‘righteous’ contrasted with the ‘wicked’. If you want something, do not covet, fight and steal- ask the Lord (Ja 4:2). If you are in trouble of some kind, cry out to the Lord and he will deliver you; the Lord is near the broken hearted, and he is powerful to save. Do not go trusting in worldly things, or in your own puny self. The Lord delivers the righteous out of all their troubles, all their afflictions, and also from temptations (34:17, 19). The Lord is powerful to do what no man can do- namely redeem a soul from death (34:22, Psalm 49:7-8).

Before coming to this concluding verse, we note two more things. Firstly, regarding the wise or righteous, ‘many are the afflictions of the righteous’ (34:19). The Lord does not say we will avoid all affliction; he promises to deliver us **out of** all afflictions. Afflictions are like the practical work in the school of wisdom. God’s own Son did not escape affliction. Jesus, the righteous One, suffered more than anyone ever, but still God kept him from any broken bones (John 19:36). God brought Jesus through affliction, raising him from the dead with great power.

The second thing to note is the reference to the wicked; ‘The face of the Lord is against those who do evil’ (34:16). Fear of the Lord is not really optional. Reject the Lord and he sets his face against you. It means you are condemned and will be cut off from the earth and from the grace of God. ‘Evil shall say the wicked’ (34:21). ‘Those who give themselves to evil will find that in time they are destroyed by that evil’ (Harman).

The closing verse, which some see as a summary, refers to redemption of the soul which is, of course, the message of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. To redeem a soul is costly; it cost the precious blood of Christ. Redemption is essential because we are all born in sin, born under divine condemnation. Redemption is salvation from judgment, salvation from ‘death row’, if you like. ‘None of those who take refuge in the Lord will be condemned’ (34:22 ESV). The corollary is that those who fail to take refuge in the Lord will be condemned, and will perish in the judgment.