

We live in a crazy world driven mad by dangers that threaten to undo us. “Terror on every side!” describes the danger (Ps 31:13). “All my fears” captures the despair (Ps 34:4). Some believers may be lulled into thinking that this kind of language does not relate to them. They may live with a false sense of security and insist on a trouble-free attitude. But if Psalm 34 seems irrelevant to them, it is only because they live in a bubble of their own imagination. The real world has a way of translating “trouble” into everyone’s dialectic and situation. Pastors know that on any given Sunday someone is going through their deepest darkest valley.

The apostle John captured the terror of the human condition when he described the four horses of the apocalypse. Evil charges into our lives leaving destruction and death. The four horses of the apocalypse symbolize the stampede of evil thundering across the world scene pounding out pain and producing havoc. Despair and devastation run rampant. Conquest, violence, famine and death come charging at us like a team of wild horses. Of all people, Christians ought to understand the devastating power of evil. We should not be surprised by the comprehensive scope and painful intensity of evil, anymore than a doctor is shocked at cancer or a police officer is shocked at crime. We hear the pounding hooves of John’s four horses of the apocalypse.¹

The human condition is vulnerable to conquest, violence, scarcity, and disease. Christians are vulnerable to awful car accidents, months of chemotherapy, and the loss of a limb when they step on improvised explosive device. We live in a fallen, broken, sin-twisted world and even in Christ we have not been given a free pass when it comes to the painful effects of evil. Western believers may not face state sponsored persecution for their faith, but they do experience social ostracism and the pressure to conform to the immortality symbols and the idols of the age. If believers are intent on following the Lord Jesus and living out New Testament Christianity, troubles will mount and multiply. Their lives will run contrary to the pervasive cultural emphasis on sexual freedom, material consumption, and the sovereign self.

Psalm 34 is linked to a strange incident in the life of David (1 Sam 21:10-15). David and his men were on the run. King Saul had vowed to kill David. He and his army were hunting David down like a wild animal. Out of desperation, David fled to Philistine country, to Achish king of Gath.² But David’s plan failed on arrival because his reputation preceded him. The dance song that had infuriated Saul blew his cover and exposed him as the Philistines’ public enemy number one: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (1 Sam 21:11). When David realized that he was in danger, he panicked and pretended to go crazy, “pounding his head on the city gate and foaming at the mouth, spit dripping from his beard.” King Achish angrily shouted,

¹ The white horse and crowned rider symbolize conquest. The sword wielding rider on the fiery red horse stands for bloodshed and violence. The rider on the black horse carries a measuring scale signifying scarcity, famine, and economic disparity. The pale horse is ridden by death itself representing pestilence, disease, plague and death. It is a frightful quartet of misery that is unleashed upon the world. We live with the threat of the stampede of evil coming at us from all directions.

² “Abimelech” means “my father is king” and may be a dynastic title that can be traced back to Genesis 20 and 26. See, Craigie, Psalms, 278; Ross, Psalms, 743; Goldingay, Psalms, 478. Goldingay writes: “Readers are thus encouraged to imagine how Abraham, Isaac, or David might have conquered fear by learning the lesson of this psalm, and/or how they might do something different with their fear. The psalm puts great emphasis on fear/reverence in relation to Yhwh, and sees this as the key to deliverance in the kind of danger Abraham, Isaac, or David were in.”

“Can’t you see he’s crazy? Why did you let him in here? Don’t you think I have enough crazy people to put up with as it is without adding another? Get him out of here!” (1 Sam 21:13-15 MSG). David fled for his life and memorialized his deliverance in Psalm 34.

Thanksgiving

*I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt his name together.*

*I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.
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.
The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.*

*Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
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 34:1-10

The literary art of this alphabet psalm with the first word of each verse beginning with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet contradicts the chaotic circumstances that served as the poem’s catalyst.³ The first half of the psalm is dedicated to thanksgiving and the second half to instruction.⁴ Although not one line is directly addressed to the Lord nearly every line in the first half of the psalm is dedicated to the Lord. David extols the Lord, glories in the Lord, seeks the Lord, calls to the Lord, experiences the Lord, and fears the Lord. The chaos of human affairs and the machinations of human depravity are eclipsed by the centripetal force of the Lord’s glory. The Lord is worthy of all praise, because he answers the psalmist’s cry and delivers him from all his fears. The Lord makes all the difference in the world.

There is no hint of disappointment with the Lord. Troubles and hardships abound. The righteous are sorely afflicted. They are brokenhearted and crushed, but the Lord is not to blame; the Lord is

³ Other acrostic psalms include Psalm 9-10 and 25. The alphabetical order is not followed perfectly. Peter Craigie, *Psalms, 277*, lists key words that are used more than three times: “hear” - 34:2, 6, 11, 17; “deliver” - 34:4, 17, 19; “fear” - 34:7, 9a, 9b, 11; “good” - 34:8, 10, 12, 14; “evil” - 34:13, 14, 16, 19, 21; “righteous” - 34:15, 19, 21.

⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 477.

praised. “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.” The psalmist holds no grudge against the Lord for what he is suffering. He does not resent his need for refuge and his cry for help. He does not put God on trial; he cries out to the Lord for mercy and deliverance in the midst of his trial. Mary’s Song of praise recalls Psalm 34:1-2: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble states of his servant” (Luke 1:46-47). The psalmist’s identity is secure in the Lord. His thanksgiving is exuberant: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” His boast resonates with God’s word through the prophet Jeremiah: ““Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,’ declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 9:23-24). The foundation to self-worth does not reside in ourselves and is not subject to our fears and shame, but it rests in the Lord who hears our cries and saves us out of all our troubles.⁵ The psalmist’s boast in the Lord is in line with the apostle Paul’s exuberance over being justified through faith in Jesus Christ. “And we boast in the hope of the glory of God” (Rom 5:1-2).

The power of the lonely ordeal is broken in the company of those who look to the Lord. David’s praise is deeply personal as indicated by his personal action: “I will extol. . . I will glory. . . I sought. . . This poor man called. . .” But it is also a deeply shared experience: “*Let us* exalt his name *together*. . . Those who look to him are radiant. . . The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.”⁶ The psalmist invites us all to, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” The author of Hebrews describes those “who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age. . .” (Heb 6:4-5). The apostle Peter calls all believers to “crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet 2:2-3). The shared in-depth experience of the word of God and the Spirit of God is how the New Testament writers heard the encouragement to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” David declares that the secret to happiness belongs to those who take refuge in the Lord. Young lions symbolize self-sufficiency while the people of God stand in complete dependency on the Lord’s grace and mercy. Ironically, it is “the self-sufficient predators of this world” who “grow weak and hungry” (Ps 34:10), while the people of God have all their needs met.⁷

When the people of God extol the Lord at all times we experience the joy of thanksgiving and the solidarity of true Christian fellowship. We understand the fear of the Lord to be a deep and abiding reverence for the Lord that drives out all other fears. However, the presence of so much anxiety, disillusionment, and frustration in the lives of Christians is a likely indication of an inadequate reverence for the Lord and a shallow understanding of what it means to put our trust in the Lord. We stand in need of instruction and spiritual direction. Gratitude inspires worship and worship inspires an ethic. To extol the Lord at all times is to live all of life in the Lord’s presence. If our “boast” is in the Lord our identity is anchored in humility and redemption.

⁵ Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 64.

⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, 751. Ross writes, “The ‘angel of the Lord,’ or ‘messenger of the Lord’ is probably a title for the Lord himself here as it is in other passages (see Gen16:7; Josh 5:14; Judg 6:11-33, etc.).”

⁷ Craigie, *Psalms*, 280.

Teaching

*Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,
keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.
Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.*

*The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.*

*The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

*The righteous person 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 will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.*

Psalm 34:11-22

The apostle Peter turned to Psalm 34 to teach the radical new lifestyle of the followers of Jesus Christ. Heartfelt worship and deep gratitude were not incompatible with being broken hearted and crushed in spirit. Far from it, hard times invoked praise, not despair. Peter wrote to believers who were homeless in their home culture because of their new found faith in Jesus Christ. They were perceived as outsiders, foreigners and strangers in their home culture. In the midst of an antagonistic and abusive honor-and-shame culture Peter emphasized “Jesus’ non-retaliatory stance.”⁸ The get-even strategies that fight fire with fire were eliminated. To curse or retaliate were not options for believers who were called to bless and evangelize. The worldly weapons of deception, slander, pride and hate, were gone and the weapons of truth, prayer, compassion and kindness were deployed.

The apostle Peter used Psalm 34 to envision this transformed lifestyle. In the course of his letter,

⁸ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 607.

he quoted or alluded to Psalm 34 seven times.⁹ Peter prayed this psalm with Resurrection hope (1 Pet 1:3) in anticipation of everlasting life and in appreciation for God's blessings in daily life: "Whoever would love life and see good days..." The person who prays this psalm has been given new birth into a living hope and is therefore inspired and empowered not to retaliate against one's abusers and slanders with hateful and deceitful speech. Psalm 34 gave Peter a description of practical Christian living in the light of the blessing we will inherit. This eschatological perspective is immediately practical. Not only must believers refrain from doing evil, "they must seek peace and pursue it" (Ps 34:14).

Since God has taken the initiative to bring about our reconciliation, we who have been reconciled in Christ can take the initiative and humble ourselves. We are freed up to pursue peace because "from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view" (2 Cor 5:16). We have not only been reconciled to God in Christ but we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Peter's emphasis is in full accord with the apostle Paul's exhortation: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone," and "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:18). Because of the grace of Christ it is possible to "Let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts, since as members of one body [we] were called to peace. And be thankful" (Col 3:15).

The benefit to living by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is *personal*. "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry" (Ps 34:15). The righteous cry out and the Lord hears and "delivers them from all their troubles." Psalm 34 "dispels the naiveté of that faith which does not contain within it the strength to stand against the onslaught of evil."¹⁰ Peter Craigie writes, "The fear of the Lord is indeed the foundation of life, the key to joy in life and long and happy days. But it is not a guarantee that life will be always easy, devoid of the difficulties that may seem to mar so much of human existence. . . .It may mend the broken heart, but it does not prevent the heart from being broken. . ." ¹¹ The apostle Paul alluded to this verse in his description of the persecutions he endured, "Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them" (2 Tim 3:11).

This psalm has a special place in my family, because it was my father's chosen psalm in the last months of his life. He prayed this psalm daily, especially these words: "The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken" (Ps 34:17-20).

My father was forty-seven and dying from stomach cancer when he claimed this psalm. He

⁹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 221-223. Jobes' break-down is helpful: 1. "Both start with blessing God." (1:3 - Ps 34:1); 2. "The result of seeking the Lord was deliverance from all David's sojournings." (1:17 - Ps 34:4); 3. "The absence of shame, highly valued in ancient society, is found in both Psalm 34 and 1 Peter." (2:6 - Ps 34:5); 4. "The benefits to those who fear the Lord are found in both the psalm and the epistle." (1:17 - Ps 34:7); 5. "The responsiveness of God to the suffering of the righteous:" (2:17 - Ps 34:9, 11); 6. "The 'many afflictions' from which the righteous are delivered are mentioned in both:" (3:12 - Ps 34:17); 7. "The redemption of the servants of the Lord:" (1:6 - Ps 34:19; 1:18; 2:16 - Ps 34:22).

¹⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 282.

¹¹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 282.

prayed Psalm 34 as much for his family as he did for himself. For him the hardest thing about dying was trusting in the Lord for the future of his wife and two boys. He knew better than anyone that the psalm was not a guarantee for a trouble free existence; in fact just the opposite. The righteous are in trouble, praying for deliverance. They cry out. They're brokenhearted. Their spirits are crushed. Life is hard. But in the end there is redemption. At a certain point you stop praying for physical healing and you begin to pray for Resurrection.

The psalmist depicts God's total personal engagement in the believer's situation. The Lord's eyes are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but his angry face disapproves of those who do evil. "The plight of the wicked is put in an equally personal form, in terms of the unwelcoming face of God (Ps 34:16)."¹² If we so choose, "we can be left utterly and absolutely outside – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored."¹³ Christ's followers may think that the Lord is distant and unaware, but Peter reminds them that the Lord is fully present, blessing his righteous servants and punishing those who do evil.

The Lord knows the suffering of the righteous and promises deliverance from all her troubles. Not a bone of her body will be broken. The metaphor of no broken bones conveys the assurance that the righteous will be rescued unharmed. Christians read the final sentence, "The Lord will rescue his servants," and understand "the unimaginable cost" in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ We can hardly begin to grasp the price paid for our redemption. The apostle John took the figure of no-broken-bones and applied it literally to Jesus. The Roman soldiers broke the legs of the two men who were crucified with Jesus. "But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs." John adds, "These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken'" (John 19:33, 36). John sees in this act a final note of fulfillment pointing to the perfect Passover Lamb ("It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones" (Ex. 12:46). "The promise to the righteous person found an unexpectedly literal realization in the passion of the perfectly Righteous One."¹⁵ The "unbounded scope" of David's final line, "No one who takes refuge in him will be condemned" (Ps 34:22b), corresponds to the apostle Paul's bold statement, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

The beauty of Psalm 34 is not diminished by its narrative link to David's ingenious performance as a madman to escape the clutches of the Philistines. Augustine drew a straight line from David's Oscar winning portrayal of insanity to the humiliation of Christ on the cross.¹⁶ David's clawing on the doors of the gate and foaming at the mouth made Augustine think of the awful humiliation suffered by the Son of God who died in his passion (not in a performance) that we might escape the judgment we deserve for our sins.

Calvin questioned whether David was led by the Holy Spirit when he pretended to go mad.

¹² Kidner, Psalms, 141.

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, "Transposition and Other Addresses," Bles, 1949, 30. Quoted in Kidner, 141.

¹⁴ Kidner, Psalms, 141.

¹⁵ Kirkpatrick, *Psalms* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, Cambridge University Press, 1891-1901. Quoted by Kidner, 141.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Psalms* 34, 73.

Although God blessed David with deliverance, Calvin believed that God did not excuse “the intermediate sin” of feigning insanity. God graciously did not lay charge to David’s sin, but that did not change the fact that David showed a lack of faith by not “committing his life entirely to God.” Furthermore, “he exposed himself and the grace of the Spirit, by whom he was governed, to the derision of the ungodly.”¹⁷

Luther had a different take. He believed that David wrote this psalm about Christ. “Therefore David (that is, Christ) changed his countenance in the time of suffering.” Luther compared David’s dramatic performance before King Achish to Christ’s “lowly suffering” before the Sanhedrin and the Romans. David’s portrayal of a madman prefigures the prophet Isaiah’s description of the Suffering Servant: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (Isa 53:2c-3). David’s humiliation, concealing his strength and power, allowing himself to be despised and rejected, prefigures Christ’s humiliation – “and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:8). The whole scene makes sense of the apostle Paul’s declaration, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

¹⁷ Calvin, Psalms, 556-557.