

Psalms Playlist

Week 3 | Psalm 34

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We're only six months in, but the images of 2020 are going to be some we never forget.

Chief Justice John Roberts presiding over the impeachment trial and acquittal of the president, only the third in history. Cars lined up at drive-through testing centers where workers in full protective gear swab for COVID-19. Parking lots and freeways completely deserted at rush hour because the nation is on lockdown. A police officer kneeling on the neck of an unconscious George Floyd, resulting in his death. Hundreds, even thousands of protesters of all races marching through city streets with "Black Lives Matter" signs. Blazing fires and broken windows caused by rioters and looters.

Accompanying these images are intense emotions, from bewilderment and frustration, to fear and anxiety, to rage and disgust, to grief and desperation. Those of us who have enjoyed the health and safety of middle-class, white, suburban America have recognized how thin the walls of our bubble are. While we've always lived close to the sharp edges of disease, corruption, injustice, and violence, a lot of us are realizing our vulnerability. It's one that others in the world, including many in our own community, have always known and experienced.

How will we respond to the events of 2020? Will we find ourselves constantly scanning the horizon, looking for the next threat? Will we hunker down, dig in, and harden our hearts and minds. Will we swallow conspiracy theories in our ache to make sense of it all? Or will we take a cue from the Psalms and lift our eyes up to seek God and receive his grace? 2020 could be the year that we become more confident in God, more obedient to his ways, and more loving to one another.

We're in week three of our summer series, Psalms Playlist, where we're allowing the Psalms to inform our minds, soothe our emotions, and guide our prayers. This week's psalm, Psalm 34, is timely because it shows us a firm foundation on which to stand when it feels like the whole world is shaking.

Day 1

Read

Psalm 34 (NIV)

Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away, and he left.

*¹ I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.*

*² I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.*

*³ Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt his name together.*

*⁴ I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.*

*⁵ Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.*

*⁶ This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.*

*⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.*

*⁸ Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.*

*⁹ Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.*

*¹⁰ The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*

*¹¹ Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.*

*¹² Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,*

*¹³ keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.*

*¹⁴ Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.*

*¹⁵ The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;*

*¹⁶ but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.*

*¹⁷ The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.*

*¹⁸ The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

*¹⁹ The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all;*

*²⁰ he protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.*

*²¹ Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.
²² The Lord will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.*

- What comfort and hope do you find in Psalm 34 during our current national crises?

Reflect

Testimonies are powerful. At times when our faith is shaken by our circumstances, the testimony of someone who has experienced God's rescue is a lifeline. Psalm 34 is such a testimony. The heading tells us it was written by David, during the time in his life where he was on the run from Saul, who was trying to kill him.

The description parallels events described in 1 Samuel 21:10–15. In fleeing Saul, David goes to the Philistine king in Gath. The people suspect that he is *the* David, the great warrior and slayer of Goliath. Fearful that his reputation will cause him to be seen as a threat, David feigns madness so he won't be recognized. The ruse works and David is able to leave.

Some might read this story and see David's escape as a lucky break. Some might admire his cleverness. Yet in Psalm 34, David gives all the credit to God for his rescue. David's God-focused perspective allowed him to see past his circumstances to the spiritual realities beyond.

That will be our aim for the week as well. If we go through life without an awareness of God and his activity in our lives, we will be much more prone to react to a crisis with fear, anger, desperation, or even hatred. But if we turn to God, we can experience peace, and react with faith, righteousness, compassion, and love.

Respond

Take all your cares, worries, frustrations and fears to God in prayer right now. Ask the Spirit to open your eyes to see how God is at work and ask him to strengthen your faith.

Day 2

Read

Psalm 34:1–7

*¹ I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
² I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.*

*³ Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt his name together.*

*⁴ I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.*

*⁵ Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.*

*⁶ This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.*

*⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.*

- What testimony does David offer?
- What does he ask others to join him in doing?

Reflect

Have you ever spent time with a child who was bubbling over with excitement? I remember a long car ride with my young cousin where he talked the entire time. Having just returned from Disney World, he couldn't wait to tell me everything. The words tumbled out of his mouth in a rush. In incredible detail, he told me about every ride he went on, every character he saw, and every meal he ate. He couldn't help but share his enthusiasm over what he'd experienced.

While most of us grow out of some of the exuberance we felt as a child, we still talk excitedly about experiences that matter to us. When something wonderful happens, we can't wait to tell someone. It's even better if it is something that they can share in, because then we encourage them to get excited too.

This is the tone of Psalm 34. David is so grateful and amazed by what the Lord has done, and is so convinced that he will do the same thing for others, that he invites all God's people to share in his enthusiasm.

Psalm 34 challenges us to recognize and rejoice in the presence and activity of God in our lives. When we do, we will praise the Lord all the time! If we think of all that he has done, is doing, and will do for us, we will glorify his name. When we reflect on the peace he offers, the salvation he provides, and the promises that he'll be faithful to deliver, his praise will always be on our lips. We will not only glory in the Lord, we will encourage those who are struggling to rejoice with us. Why? Because we trust that he hears us in our distress and answers.

Here David is giving his personal testimony. From experience, he knows that he can go to God with his troubles and God will respond. Commentators tell us that the verb translated "sought" is "never used of seeking someone or something whose location is unknown...such seeking is serious, purposeful searching, not confused wondering or wandering."¹ God has made himself available to his people. He is not hidden from us. He does not ask us to jump

¹ Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 568.

through religious hoops. We don't need to wonder if he will hear. The Lord invites us to come to him for help and trust that he will respond in whatever way is best.

There is a radiance that comes from trusting the Lord's response, from knowing that your faith in him will never bring you shame. It's never foolish to trust in God. This doesn't mean that every prayer will be answered the way we envision, but it will be answered in the way that is best. I like the way Pastor Tim Keller explains it: "God always answers your prayers in precisely the way you want them to be answered if you knew everything he knew."

Let Psalm 34 both comfort you and challenge you to be evermore mindful of God's presence in your life. Praise him quickly and turn to him easily because he is right there with you.

- Are you quick to praise God for who he is and all he has done for you? Even in tough times? Do you believe that he is always working for your good? If not, what prevents you?
- Is the first thing you do when you encounter difficulty turn to God? Why or why not?

Respond

Psalm 34 encourages us to pray. Take some time to do so now. Also consider how you can encourage others to praise God and turn to him. Who can you share your testimony of God's goodness with?

Day 3

Read

Psalm 34:8–14

- ⁸ Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.*
- ⁹ Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.*
- ¹⁰ The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*
- ¹¹ Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.*
- ¹² Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,*
- ¹³ keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.*
- ¹⁴ Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.*

- What commands do you see in this section? What does God expect of us?
- What are benefits to obeying?

Reflect

There is something in the bright flash of lightening followed immediately by the deafening boom of thunder that reminds us that there are powerful forces on this earth that we can't restrain. Meteorologists track severe weather on radar and try to predict its path and intensity, but when the storm is on top of us, and the rain is coming down in sheets, the wind is howling, and lightening cracks across the sky, we recognize that we have no control. Just because we know how and why storm systems form doesn't mean we can manipulate them.

We can sometimes act as if we have the hows and whys of God all figured out. As Christians, we can treat God as an object of study or a code to crack. God has graciously revealed himself to us in ways that accommodate our finite human minds. That in no way means that we can make demands of him, any more than we can tell the lightening where it should strike or insist that the winds calm. He is Lord and Creator and his power is restrained only by his own goodness and mercy. Though he loves us, he is not beholden to us. There is such a thing as a healthy fear, or reverence, of the Lord.

Proverbs, a book of wisdom, starts off by telling us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). Before you can become wise, you must have the correct view of God. Psalms 34 echoes that sentiment. While God has lovingly invited us to experience his goodness, and offers us refuge, he is worthy of reverence and respect. He insists on it. He is God and we are not.

Unless we bring ourselves under God's authority and acknowledge his rightful rule over our lives, we will end up in disaster. But those who fear the Lord and seek him, will lack no good thing. Part of that reverence and respect will include agreeing with him on what is good and what is evil and then living accordingly. Psalm 34 singles out one evil in particular in verse 13 — that which comes from the lips and the tongue.

We live in a society where lying has become routine. Now some may excuse it by saying "everyone does it." They can call it "shading the truth," label it "spin," or claim that "omitting facts is not the same as lying," but let's be honest, it's all lying. And it won't just affect our personal relationships. As a nation, we're all having a hard time knowing what is true. From corporations to politicians to media, the constant lying has left us cynical and bewildered. And while we may not be able to fix this massive problem in our culture, we can do what Psalms 34:13 commands and keep our own lips from telling lies.

Christians must be ruthlessly honest and speak only what we know to be true, even if it's difficult or inconvenient. And that includes our digital speech. We shouldn't promote anything, from a product to an article to a candidate, if we doubt the truthfulness of their claims. Better to say nothing than spread a lie. We need to be wise in who we trust and discerning about what we share. Of all people, those who follow Christ should be known as people of integrity. Our witness depends on it.

As believers, we also want to be known as those who do good and seek peace. In Hebrew, the concept of *shalom*, or peace means more than just a lack of conflict. It's harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, and tranquility. We pursue this for our own lives, and we also pursue *shalom* for our community and nation. As we rest under the loving authority of God, we turn to him and away from evil and do good. Those are the instructions of Psalm 34.

- Do you think you have an appropriate fear or reverence for the Lord? How do you demonstrate it?
- In what ways do you actively turning from evil and doing good, or seeking peace and pursuing it? How could you do more?

Respond

Sit before the Lord and remember his immense power and complete authority over you and every created thing. Then remember his vast love for you. Ask the Spirit to search you and bring to mind sins, hidden and known, confess, and accept his forgiveness. Ask him for the strength and endurance to change sinful habits so you can turn from evil and do good.

Day 4

Read

Psalm 34:15–22

- ¹⁵ The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;
¹⁶ but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.*
- ¹⁷ The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.
¹⁸ The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*
- ¹⁹ The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all;
²⁰ he protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.*
- ²¹ Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.
²² The Lord will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.*

- What do you find comforting in these verses? Why?

Reflect

I've seen the frustrated tears in a woman's eyes because she has been victimized twice – once by the man who raped her, and then again by people in authority who refused to seek justice on her behalf.

I've heard the pain in the voices of African American men and women when their just cause has been ignored. Our justice system has failed too many times to hold police officers who abuse their power accountable. When that abuse happens, too often it's at the expense of black lives.

I've read accounts of Christians in other times or other parts of the world who have served the Lord, loved one another, and worked for the good of all people. Yet, they've been persecuted or even martyred for their faith. Their spilled blood cries out for justice.

Perhaps you have been denied justice in some way. Whether that denial has been big and life altering or small, but still significant, someone has hurt you and gotten away with it. Perhaps they even seem to be prospering while you carry the burden of their sin on your own back.

Psalms 34 gives hope to all those who've been broken and bruised. Don't let appearances deceive you. No matter how much it may look like the wicked prosper, God is on your side. He is close to you, brokenhearted one. He hears your cries, he knows your pain, and he will deliver you.

Evil itself will slay the wicked. That which they embrace and indulge will ultimately be their demise. God will see to it. They will be condemned. Their names will be blotted out as if they'd never existed. It's a terrifying fate. Yet if they do not turn to God and repent, there will be no escape.

Of course, ultimately, it's the saving grace of Jesus that divides the wicked and the righteous. His righteousness is given to all those who trust in his name. That's the scandal of the cross. The darkest deeds can be forgiven because Jesus died for all people. All of us who are right before God owe our standing to him alone.

If you've put your faith in Christ and committed to following him, you are one of the righteous and God is watching over you. If life's troubles are threatening to crush you, turn to him. Read Psalm 34:17–22 again. Lean on it. Let it soothe your soul. The Lord is closer than you might think.

- Have there been times in your life when you've been brokenhearted and crushed in Spirit? How was God there? Who do you know that needs to hear that testimony?
- How can you be a help and advocate for those who are hurting? What can you do to help alleviate their suffering?

Respond

If you are struggling through a difficult time or have been a victim of injustice, pour your heart out to God in prayer. Know that he hears your prayers.

Those of us who are doing okay have a responsibility to help carry the burdens of the hurting. Pray for someone that you know who is suffering. Ask the Lord to reveal to you tangible ways you can help.

Day 5

I love Psalm 34. It might become one of my new favorites. How about you?

On Day 5 we'll take one last look at our Psalm for the week and invite the Spirit to speak to us through the Word. Clear your mind of distractions, and spend some time with your Father today.

Reflect

Read through the Psalm 34 one more time.

Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away, and he left.

*¹ I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.*

*² I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.*

*³ Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt his name together.*

*⁴ I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.*

*⁵ Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.*

*⁶ This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.*

*⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.*

*⁸ Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.*

*⁹ Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.*

¹⁰ The lions may grow weak and hungry,

but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

¹¹ *Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.*

¹² *Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,*

¹³ *keep your tongue from evil
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¹⁴ *Turn from evil and do good;
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¹⁵ *The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;*

¹⁶ *but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.*

¹⁷ *The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.*

¹⁸ *The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

¹⁹ *The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all;*

²⁰ *he protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.*

²¹ *Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.*

²² *The Lord will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.*

- What do you find most moving in this Psalm? What section or verse speaks most to you? Consider memorizing it.

Connect

At the end of the week, as we meditate one more time on our Psalm, I always find my thoughts turning to Jesus. He knew the emotions of which the Psalmists sing. Psalm 34 is no exception.

Too often I lose perspective. I don't acknowledge the presence and activity of God in my life. During his earthly life, Jesus never did this. He trusted in the plans and purposes of the Father and praise for him was always on his lips.

Yet Jesus also knows what it is to cry out to God in agony and distress. The only truly righteous man who's ever lived knows what it is to suffer injustice. Matthew's Gospel records that from the cross, "Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')" (Matthew 27:46). This time, God doesn't

answer. In that moment, he denied the Son justice, so he could save you and me. But ultimately, there will be a reckoning.

Every cry for deliverance is heard and will ultimately be answered. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we are brought into a right relationship with God and adopted into his family. Our Father will always hear and answer his children who are being oppressed by the wicked forces in our world. Let no one misunderstand, he is on their side. Evil doesn't get to win, because Christ is already victorious.

Yet, as we wait for ultimate justice, we don't sit idle. We do what Psalm 34 instructs and we turn from evil and do good, we seek peace and pursue it (verse 14). We do what is right in our own lives and pursue *shalom* for those around us. Those of us who are privileged to live in a democracy can affect change with our voices and with our votes. And if we're called to risk something by calling out injustice and working for good, then we must do it. If we are called to give up something for those in need, then let's answer that call. After all, Jesus gave everything for us.

Respond

Before the Lord, examine your own heart. How does Psalm 34 speak to you?

- Commit to prayer. How can you attune yourself to God's activity in your life? How can you start your day so that you are aware of his presence? For what can you praise him throughout the day? How can you turn to God with all your troubles and know he hears you? How can you take refuge in him?
- Commit to action. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Ask the Spirit to make you wise. Turn from evil and do good. What does that look like for you specifically? How can you pursue peace in your own life and help bring *shalom* to others?