

Horsley Evangelical Church ([www.horsleyec.org.uk](http://www.horsleyec.org.uk))

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### Psalm 34 A Wisdom Psalm

Psalm 34 is an example of a *wisdom Psalm*. There are at least 9 other wisdom Psalms in the Psalter – Psalms 1, 19, 32, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119 and 128. And they have similar features. Typically they *contrast* the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous, the actions of the foolish and the actions of the wise. Wisdom Psalms also speak to us about the fear of the Lord, encourage us to read the word of the Lord. And in such Psalms, the Psalmist often addresses us as his children.

And it's helpful just to keep these things in mind as we study today. In addition, Psalm 34 is an example of an *alphabetic acrostic*, which just means that each successive verse of the Psalm begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and so there are 22 verses in this Psalm. And this style of writing helped the people to memorize the Psalm.

Also, the title tells us Psalm 34 is linked to a particular episode in David's life - *When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left*. We read this story in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David is running from Saul before he became king and he flees to the Philistine city of Gath. David is recognised there by people who remembered he killed the Philistine giant Goliath (who was from Gath) - and so David is very much afraid. He fains insanity, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down the beard. Abimelech, whose other name was Achish says to his servants, "This man is insane, get him out of here". And so David escapes Abimelech and Gath and goes down to the cave of Adullam where his own family and 400 others gather round him.

And it's helpful to remember this background when studying the Psalm. David learned important lessons at that time in his life, and now he is seeking to teach us from his experience. In particular, there are four things David urges us to do – things which are all marks of godly wisdom. The first is to *praise the Lord*, the second is to *seek the Lord*, the third is to *fear the Lord* and the fourth is to *trust the Lord*. And this is how we are going to divide up the Psalm this morning.

So first in verses 1-3 we are called to *praise the Lord*. **Read verses 1-3**. It seems that after this incident with Abimelech, David made this resolve or perhaps renewed his resolve to praise and worship the Lord at all times. It's the phrase *at all times* that's important here. David realised that there are no occasions when it is not appropriate to praise the Lord.

The Hebrew word translated 'extol' refers to bending the knee. So in verses 1 and 2 David is resolving to praise the Lord with bended knee, singing lips and boasting soul. **Read verses 1 and 2a again**. In other words, with every faculty he has, David will praise the Lord. And he offers this to us as the way of wisdom. It is the wise who worship the Lord at all times.

It is always right and fitting to praise the Lord. Why? Well, the Scripture tells us God does all things well. All things are under his control. His good and perfect character never changes. His plans and purposes are always glorious, and he is working all things together for the good of those who trust him. God's love for those who fear him is unending. We may not understand his ways, but we can trust him. Therefore it is always right to praise the Lord.

And the New Testament echoes this call. **Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Philippians 4:4**. And as our teacher, David is urging us to do the same. **Read verses 2b, 3**. To extol the Lord is something the godly have always done, individually and together. And it is something the godly encourage one another to do. We may be afflicted, as David was at this point – chased by Saul and frightened by Abimelech. But David has learned that it is always right to praise the Lord. And when any believer is

persuaded about this, it revolutionizes their life. The way of the world is to complain and fret. But the way of the wise is to praise and trust the One who is good and does all things well.

Have you learned this lesson yet? I mentioned last week a book which was quite influential in my early years as a Christian, “Created to praise”. In the very first chapter the author tells how when he went to India on a preaching trip, he resolved to meditate on a verse of Psalm 34 each day. But when he arrived in India he discovered a rather unpleasant rash which he knew, in the heat of India, would be rather unpleasant. Before bed he turned to the first verse of his Psalm. **Read verse 1.** In faith he resolved to put this into practice, and he testifies what a blessing he knew because of it. Is it something you resolve to do each day?

**Praise the Lord.** Then in verse 4-6 David urges us to **seek the Lord.** **Read verses 4-6.** *Seek the Lord* David is telling us - that is the way of wisdom. Do not forsake him or turn away from him. Do not become discouraged or disheartened. Do not doubt his good intentions for your life. Seek the Lord and call upon him.

Then David testifies that this is what he did in the situation before Abimelech. We are told in the title how fearful David was. We are also told how he tried to act his way out of danger by pretending to be insane. Yet it was not David’s theatrics that delivered him; it was the Lord. And we are told here that before David acted, he sought the face of the Lord. David turned to God in prayer, and now he tells us how the Lord delivered him from all his fears. How frightened David was at that time - pursued by Saul and finding himself in the city of Gath. He was recognised as being the slayer of Goliath and some Philistines even remembered the song the Israelites sang, celebrating David’s victory over their champion. And to make matters worse, David even had the sword of Goliath with him! What a tight spot!

But David sought the Lord and the Lord heard him. David cried out to God and God delivered him. And he urges us to do the same. This is the way of wisdom – for who else can help you? **Read verse 5 again.** If we follow our own ways, our faces may well be covered with shame, for we do not possess wisdom in ourselves. Our own paths may well lead to shame and disgrace. But for those who seek the Lord, who stretch out hands in prayer and petition - their faces are never covered with shame. Their faces are *radiant*. The word can describe the joy of a mother finding a lost child, or it can refer to the reflected glory of God. Moses’ face for example was radiant because he sought the Lord. And when you and I seek him, our faces too will reflect something of the glory of God and the joy of God.

**Read verse 6 again.** David is the poor man. And he means that in a spiritual sense. It may mean that David is ashamed of the way he pretended insanity rather than simply trusting in the Lord. Or it may just be a general description of how David knew he was poor in spirit. But the Lord Jesus tells us *how blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven!* We are all poor in spirit. But the wise, realising their spiritual poverty, seek the Lord and know his salvation – whether that is physical or indeed spiritual. For it is as we seek the Lord spiritually that we know that far greater deliverance that is in the Lord Jesus .

Then in verses 7-14 David urges us to **fear the Lord.** The wise person **fears the Lord**, just as they **praise the Lord** and **seek the Lord.** Indeed the Proverbs tell us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. **Read verses 7-14.**

David is probably thinking back to his experience before Abimelech when he writes – **read verse 7 again.** David felt surrounded by enemies in the Philistine city of Gath. But he now realises that it was the angel of the Lord who really surrounded him, protecting him and delivering him. David feared Abimelech, but he feared the Lord more - and therefore knew God’s deliverance. The angel of the Lord can either refer to an angelic messenger the Lord sends. Or some think it’s a term which really means the Lord himself. Either way, David knew the truth of the line in our second hymn today, “Fear him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear.”

And David invites us to use our *senses* to prove that this is true. *Taste* and *see* that the Lord is good. Then in verse 11, “*Listen* to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” “Use the God-given senses of *taste* and *sight* and *hearing* and tell me if it is not right” says David. It’s no good just making this theoretical. You must put it into practice. There may be someone listening this morning and you have never trusted Jesus Christ for yourself. You have never cried out to him. Your faith is just second hand. And you’re not sure therefore if it is all true. Well, my friend there is only one way to find out. Trust in the Lord for yourself. Ask him to be your God. Ask Christ to be your Saviour. Ask him to forgive you your sins. No wonder you think church is all a bit boring. You are not connected. You are not properly committed. But *God* tells you today to taste and see that the he is good. It’s all very well someone telling you the chocolate brownie is delicious. But you will never know until you try some for yourself. Taste! See! That surely is the wise thing to do.

**Read verse 9, 10.** The lion stands for those who are self-reliant. If there is one animal that can fend for itself it’s the lion. He is self-sufficient. He depends on no one to get this food. Yes, but even the lion can grow weak and hungry at times. But if you will fear the Lord, if you will revere him and take care how you live before him, if you will trust him and seek to honour him, love him and serve him - he will supply all your needs. Wisdom does not rely of self. Wisdom relies on God.

And then David assumes the classic role of a wisdom teacher. **Read verse 11.** It’s like being in the book of Proverbs. The teacher assumes the role of a father speaking to his children. And true biblical instruction takes place in a relationship. The teacher cares for his students as a father cares for his children. David wants what is best for us and he assumes a relationship with us. David is not being proud or looking down on us. He is sharing something he has learned. And he shares it because he loves us in the Lord.

So David, what does it mean to fear the Lord? Well, says David, it means to *obey him*. **Read verse 12-15 again.** First of all, David speaks about right the use of the tongue. If we are to fear the Lord it will mean keeping a careful rein on our tongue. Perhaps David is reflecting again on his own experience before Abimelech. He is not proud of how he used his tongue then. He had used it for evil rather than good. And we must be careful not to do the same. The Proverbs have much to say about the wrong use of the tongue, telling lies, slandering, gossiping, answering harshly, stirring up division etc. But if we fear God we will use his gift of speech very carefully, speaking the truth and speaking only what is helpful to people.

And if we fear God we will turn from every evil path and seek peace and reconciliation. Peter tells us that as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all men. And of course, if we fear the Lord we will live at peace with him, confessing our sins and repenting of sin whenever we are aware of it.

And the fear of God is *life-giving*. **Read verse 12 again.** This is the best way to live – the only way to live. How does all this apply to you today? Are you living in the fear of God? Are you careful to keep his commands? Are you quick to confess your sins? Do you love life and desire to see many good days? Then live in the fear of God. This is the way of wisdom.

So the wise person **praises God, seeks God, fears God**, and then finally in verses 15-22, the wise person **trusts God**. **Read verses 15-22.** Sometimes the Scriptures emphasis the Lord’s *transcendence* – the otherness of God. But verse 15 in particular emphasises his *immanence*, that is to say his nearness, his willingness to be known and accommodate himself to our understanding. This verse speaks about the Lord’s *eyes* and *ears*. You must trust him, says David, that his *eyes* are on the righteous and his *ears* are attentive to their cry. David is reminding us then of the Lord’s tenderness as well as his knowledge. The temptation is to think that the Lord does not see or hear or care. David must have felt that in Gath and with Abimelech. But he has learned to trust the Lord.

Then the Lord’s face is mentioned in verse 16. His face is described elsewhere as being very beautiful to the believer. But if his face is against you, then this is truly terrible. And although the

Lord may not immediately punish the wicked, David says, “Trust him, he will.” **Read verse 15, 16 again.** And their destruction will be complete – there will be no memory of them left.

Verse 17 and 18 is again David’s testimony in Gath. The words *broken-hearted* and *crushed in spirit* (18) surely describe how David felt. And again the temptation was to think the Lord doesn’t care. But he does. He is *close* to the broken-hearted and *saves* those who are crushed in spirit. The wise person trusts in the Lord and that involves patience doesn’t it. For the Lord does not always work as quickly as we would want. But his timing is best.

The Lord never promises his loved ones a trouble-free life, and trouble is not necessarily a sign of his displeasure or discipline – think of the life of our Lord Jesus. But the Lord does promise to *deliver* his people. **Read verses 19, 20.** We need not insist the protection of bones is literal (although the New Testament writers see this verse as a prophecy that the bones of the Lord Jesus would not be broken.) But verse 20 does mean that all God’s people will be taken home to glory.

And in the end, it will be very clear who the children of God are and who the children of wrath are. **Read verse 21, 22.** But the point is that we are to *trust in the Lord*. That is wisdom. Judge not before the appointed time. The life we live now is by faith. We live by faith not by sight. We live by faith in the word of God, and the word of God promises that God shall never leave us. He shall hear our prayers and answer them perfectly. And God’s children shall be delivered and saved, and the wicked shall be destroyed. So if we do not see that happening immediately, we must trust in the Lord and continue to live by faith. That is the way of wisdom. This is the path the Lord calls us to take.

Here then is a wisdom Psalm. David urges us to choose the path of wisdom. The wise person *praises* the Lord at all times. The wise person continues to *seek* the Lord and does not forsake him. The wise person remembers to *fear* the Lord, not man. And the wise person *trusts* in the Lord. He does not judge by outward appearances. He trusts in the promises of God and lives by faith. And so may the Lord help us all to live like this.