

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 34 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 34:1-22 ESV

1 Of David, when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away. 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 Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together! 4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. 5 Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. 6 This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. 7 The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. 8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! 9 Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! 10 The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. 11 Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. 12 What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? 13 Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. 14 Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. 15 The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry. 16 The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. 17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. 19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. 20 He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken. 21 Affliction will slay 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. Song of Gratitude: David thanks God for deliverance and invites us to know God like he does (1-10)
 - a. Determination: I will praise God, and I want you to join me (1-3)
 - b. Basis: Fearing God always pays off (4-7)
 - c. Invitation: Experience His goodness for yourself (8-10)
- II. Song of Wisdom: David turns his experience into a lesson (11-22)
 - a. Introduction: Learn the fear of God from me (11-12)
 - b. Instruction: Fear God by doing the right thing (13-14)
 - c. Reward: Fear God because it always pays off (15-22)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Psalm 34 is an acrostic poem that follows the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (technically it skips one letter). Nobody knows with certainty why some Psalms do this, but it at least aids memorization. I would add that it communicates a message: from A to Z, God is faithful to those who fear Him. That's what this Psalm is about.

David is the author of Psalm 34, and he penned it after his escape from Abimelech (see 1 Sam. 21:10-15). His alphabetical approach to these lyrics makes the flow difficult to follow. Rather than building toward a climactic point in stair-step fashion, he makes the same point in lots of different ways, as you might expect for an acrostic poem. But there is still a neat division, starting in verse 11. In fact, the division is so neat that they feel like two different songs, united by the theme of deliverance. The first half is a song of gratitude for David's deliverance (1-10), and the second half is a song of wisdom that shows us practically how to experience such deliverances (11-22). Had it not been for the acrostic, we might have wrongly supposed these were two separate songs entirely.

The first half—what I've called, the "Song of Gratitude"—begins with David's determination to praise God personally, verbally, consistently, and corporately for his deliverance from Abimelech (1-3). Next David shares the basis for wanting to praise God by narrating his personal experience (4, 6), while not missing the opportunity to make broader application (5, 7). He concludes the "Song of Gratitude" with an emotional appeal to experience

God's goodness for themselves by staking their welfare on Yahweh's character (8-10). It's impossible to "taste and see" God's goodness without skin in the game.

The second half—what I've called, the "Song of Wisdom"—turns David's experience with God into a lesson. David learned this lesson the hard way, for he only needed deliverance in the first place because he had trusted in his own resources. I say this because: David lied to the priest because he was not trusting God (1 Sam. 21:2, 8); he fled Israel, which was usually frowned upon in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 12:10-20; 26:6-33; Ruth 1; etc.); he seems unwise to have fled with Goliath's sword to Goliath's hometown (1 Sam. 21:9-10). The evidence points to David's departure from Israel being sin, and his seizure by Abimelech a natural consequence of that sin (cf. Ps. 56). Thus, when David instructs us to "keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit" (34:11), he's preaching to himself. David had feared Saul more than God, lied and fled to Philistia for shelter, found a dungeon instead—and only after that—called out to God. In his mercy, God answered, but David wants to spare us by teaching us wisdom. Wisdom begins with the fear of God, and those who fear God do right, even when they're scared. The outcome of fearing God over man is that the LORD hears our cry. None of us does this perfectly, but God is merciful. Even when we're stuck in a prison of our own making, we can cry out, and He delivers. When God does deliver, our responsibility is to praise God like David did (1-10) and instruct others based on our experience (11-22).

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 Of David, when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away. I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

—This story is told in 1 Sam. 21:10-15. There the king's name is, "Achish," not "Abimelech." It's possible he went by two names. My preferred explanation, though, is that Philistine kings were titled, "Abimelech," in much the same way that Egyptian ones were called, "Pharaoh," and Roman ones, "Caesar."

—This was an ugly story in David's life. Fearing for his life as he fled from Saul, he lied to the priest, saying he was "on the king's business" (21:8; cf. v. 2). Finding no refuge in his deception, he fled from the house of God to that house of Gath—Goliath's hometown. Supposing he could remain anonymous, they found him out, so he feigned madness, allowing saliva to run down his beard (a great indignity in the Ancient Near East, which they supposed no sane person would allow). The king of Gath released him, and David credited the LORD, but he never should have found refuge in such a place to start with. According to Psalm 56, David was "seized" (probably, imprisoned) for a time.

—Some commentators think David sinned to feign madness before the king, but I don't think so. Psalm 56 was written from the Philistine prison, suggesting that David's wayward slide hit rock bottom, and by that time, had turned back to God. It was after this return to God that David feigned madness. It seems to me, then, that God gave David a strategy for getting out of there alive. Wise as a serpent but innocent as a dove, David acted like a madman, and they let him go.

—"at all times... continually":

- When God delivers us from trial, we should not only thank God for it; we should do so often. Too often, we are like the Israelites who witness a Red Sea parting and then complain about provision. Gratitude turns to grumbling if we don't fix our hearts ("I WILL bless the LORD...") on filling our mouths with it.
- Later David will talk about the "afflictions" of the righteous. Times of affliction still fit the category of "all times," in which we should bless the LORD. There is never a bad time to praise God because His character never changes. He is always good and therefore always worthy of continual praise.
- 1 Thess. 5:16-18: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

2 My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. 3 Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!

—"My soul": praise should spring from the deepest place in us.

—"its boast": our temptation after experiencing something wonderful (like David's deliverance) is to pat ourselves on the back. David refuses to do that. He boasts not in his wise escape tactic, but in the LORD who gave him a strategy.

—Just in these first three verses, David employs diverse vocabulary for praising God: "bless... praise... boast... magnify... exalt." No human language communicates the high praise that God deserves, nor the gladness that His people feel in His presence.

—"let the humble hear and be glad":

- The worshipers of God are necessarily humble. Those who lack humble character can spout right doctrine, and they can even express exuberance in corporate worship. But if these are not

accompanied by humility of heart, the worship is Pharisaical. As Jesus warned, "You worship me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me."

- Why are the worshipers of God necessarily humble? God is a jealous God and He refuses to compete. As Spurgeon says, "The Lord hath by right a monopoly of his creatures' praise." As long as I'm exalting myself, regardless of what I claim with my lips, I cannot exalt God. Humble character must adorn our worship, lest towering pride disqualify it.

—"with me... together":

- At first, the "humble hear" David's testimony; now they join him in praise. The aim of our testimony is not only to praise God by its re-telling, but also to stir up praise in others. Stories of God's goodness inspire awe and worship. They should "continually" be on our lips.
- The impulse of private worship is toward corporate worship. The one who loves worshiping alone loves worshiping with others also. The joy discovered in private worship cannot be contained in private. Corporate worship should be the overflow of joy discovered in the secret place of worshiping God.
- Not only does corporate worship flow naturally out of private worship, but David instigates it. He invites people to come worship God with him. We should likewise be worship-instigators. Telling our God stories, we should invite others to celebrate with us.

4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. 5 Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. 6 This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. 7 The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

—In the first three verses, David emphasizes his intent to praise the LORD continually, inviting us to join him. Here, the theme shifts to his cause for praise: deliverance.

—The theme of deliverance is obvious through these verses: "he answered me and delivered me" (4); "cried... heard... saved" (6); "delivers" (7). In context, then, verse 5 is not just about having a "quiet time with God" and glowing like Moses. To "look to him" means to rely on Him for deliverance from trouble.

—Verses 4 and 6 reflect David's experience, while verses 5 and 7 tilt toward instruction. Every answer to prayer is its own lesson. To be a disciple is to never cease learning. Simultaneously, to be a disciple is to never cease teaching. When God delivers us, the Spirit instructs us, and we respond like David: by telling of His works continually (1) AND of the lessons we learned from His works (5, 7, 11ff). After verse 11, the Psalm turns hard in this direction, becoming almost more of an epistle than a song.

—"I sought the LORD": he did not just ask, but sought. When deliverance is not immediate, we keep asking. Only after persisting, can we properly say, "I sought."

—"from all my fears": God delivers us from both the internal emotion—"fears" (4)—and their material cause: "troubles" (6).

—"look to him... radiant... faces shall never be ashamed":

- "radiant":
 - Similar usage in Isa. 60:5 ("Then you will see and be **radiant**, and your heart will thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, the wealth of the nations will come to you.") and in Jer. 32:12 ("They will come and shout for joy on the height of Zion, and they will be **radiant** over the bounty of the LORD.")
 - To be "radiant" is to glow with gratitude for God's manifest goodness.
- Those who look to God for deliverance glow with joy and gratitude for His goodness; their faces are not darkened—"ashamed"—by God's absence.
- Practically, I feel like I can often discern a brother or sister in Christ by the light I see in their countenance. The discernment is probably spiritual, and I doubt non-Christians would perceive it. Or if they did, they would be unable to identify it. But I do think it's there.
- Our faces should be aglow with joy and gratitude that shines in a way that others notice. When your hope is in this dark world, it darkens your countenance. When your hope is in Him who is Light, He brightens your eyes.

—"this poor man cried":

- David had been anointed king, but on the run from Saul, he dwelt in caves, in a Philistine prison, and wherever he could find refuge. He truly was poor, in the financial sense, when he wrote this.
- At the same time, David commonly calls himself "poor," seemingly even when he has money. The language of "poor and needy" is common in the Psalms (Pss. 40:17; 70:5; 74:21; 109:22; 113:7; etc.). It seems, then, that "poor" should not be limited to finances, but to any circumstances that limit us. Further, I venture to guess (and it's only a guess) that Jesus derived His beatitude—"Blessed are

the poor in spirit"—from the Psalms.

- No matter how rich we are—in money, in time, in friends, in popularity, in energy, in opportunity, in gifts, or in anything of this world—worshippers must never depart in their hearts from the humble floor of, "this poor man cried."
- Israel's hymn book is a hymn book of the poor. It is the worship of those who feel, deep in their souls, a sharp dependence upon God. To not feel such a need for God is to sever the nerve of worship. We worship Him from a place of holy desperation.

—"the angel of the LORD encamps":

- The "angel of the LORD" often manifests physically in human form, as when Jacob wrestled Him. Even then, however, the moniker is used interchangeably with, "the LORD," which is why many (including me) interpret many of these instances as the preincarnate Christ.
- Immanuel's promise to always be with us (Mt. 18:20; 28:20) takes an Old Testament form here: He encamps. In context, it is a military encampment. He encamps around us in order to deliver us.

—"from all my fears... those who fear Him" (vv. 4, 7): the solution to fear is not certainty, as we so often suppose, and as is so elusive until we see Jesus, face to face. The solution to fear is possessing a greater fear to displace it. To fear God is to fear nothing else. Since "those who fear Him" (7) parallels "those who look to Him" (5), the fear of God approximates faith. With trembling awe, in fear and faith, we look to Him.

8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! 9 Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! 10 The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

—"Oh... Oh":

- If God's works never lead us to exclaim, "Oh!" then we have not adequately responded to the invitation, "taste and see"!!
- The double "Oh" communicates that these verses parallel one another.

—"taste and see" (with some confidence on "takes refuge" and "those who fear Him"):

- Worship without experience is anemic. Worship is a celebration of our experience of God's goodness, wisdom, or power. At times we will enter dry seasons, but even then, we have memories of God's goodness—a common sustenance for desperate psalmists. We also have hope for the future, which imports future joy into present experience. Romans 5:2: "*we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.*" Thus, if we lack present experience, we can import joy from past gratitude and joy over future hope into our present, sustaining us until God delivers.
- To "taste and see" is to experience God's goodness for ourselves. This happens as we take "refuge in Him"—a metaphor for trusting in God for protection. It also happens as we "fear the LORD"—another way of exhorting us to place our trembling trust in Him. The point is: if you want to "taste and see" you can't do so without risk. If you want to enjoy the ride, you have to get on the bus.
- On that note, tasting and seeing His goodness relates to answered prayer in this context. We who stake our lives on Him, trusting Him and not our own resources, taste His goodness. Refuse the risk, miss the adventure.
- In this life, however, as delectable as God is—it is still only a taste. We crave the day when our appetizer becomes an entrée, and when our peek becomes panoramic. The good news is: even a taste of God's goodness surpasses the buffet of this world.
- Kidner: "Both Hebrews 6:5 and 1 Peter 2:3 use this verse to describe the first venture into faith, and to urge that the tasting should be more than a casual sampling."
 - Heb. 6:4-5: *For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who 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...*
 - 1 Pet. 2:2-3: *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have **tasted** that the Lord is good.*
 - Kidner's point in mentioning these two verses is to show that the invitation to taste and see the LORD's goodness is viewed by New Testament authors as an initial invitation only, as if God was saying, "There's more where that came from!"
- Spurgeon: "Faith is the soul's taste; they who test the Lord by their confidence always find him good, and they become themselves blessed. The second clause of the verse ["happy are those who take refuge in Him"], is the argument in support of the exhortation contained in the first sentence ["Taste and see"]."

—"refuge... no lack":

- Not only must we trust God for protection, but also provision.
- This was David's circumstance in 1 Samuel 21, the background for this Psalm. Running from Saul, he sought bread from the priest and refuge in Gath. Having lied to the priest (that he was on the king's business, 1 Sam. 21:2, 8), and having found refuge in Goliath's hometown rather than in God's land (21:10-15), he trusted in his ability to spin a web and secure his own fortune—and he paid the price with imprisonment (Ps. 56).
- How do we act like David? How do we trust our own resources for protection and provision? When David was on his A-game, he always "inquired of the LORD" before making big decisions. First, we inquire what God wants us to do. Once we hear, we do that thing, even if it's scary. That could mean saying no to a job that would increase our pay because God says no. It could mean saying yes to an opportunity that requires great risk. It could also mean refusing to compromise righteousness—like David did when he lied—in order to remain secure. Our motto should be to do it God's way, and then let the chips fall.

—"those who fear him... those who seek the LORD": earlier we saw that "those who look to Him" (5) parallels "those who fear him" (7). Now we find another parallel: "those who fear him" (9) and "those who seek the LORD" (10). If "fear" is the same thing as earthly fear, then this would make zero sense. If I'm afraid of rattlesnakes, I don't "seek" to cuddle them. If I fear the LORD, however, I seek to be as close as possible. Earthly fear is similar to godly fear, in that both make us tremble. But earthly fear makes me tremble and flee; godly fear makes me tremble and draw near.

—"fear the LORD, you his saints": ostensibly, "his saints" should already "fear the LORD". Reality is different, though. We who begin fearing God too often slide into fearing other things. We need this exhortation consistently to keep us from sliding.

—"young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing":

- Lions symbolize strength and non-reliance upon God. In all their speed and energy and ferocity and power and cunning—with every resource at their disposal for conquering prey, even they get hungry sometimes.
- When we think we are "lions"—not recognizing our poverty before God (6)—we resist staking our lives on His protection and provision.
- The world has to think like a lion because they have no God to depend on. As believers, we should guard against, "lion" mentality, which says, "If I don't take care of myself, no one will. It all relies on me."
- In contrast to self-reliant lions, Yahweh-reliant people "lack no good thing." That reliance is exercised by the verbs, "sought the LORD... look to Him... cried [to Him]... fear Him... taste and see... takes refuge in... fear [Him]" (vv. 4-9).
- How can we say that those who seek the LORD "lack no good thing"? Is this poetic exaggeration? Believers throughout the world have very little.
 - In context, "no good thing" references provision and protection. A vacation to Bora Bora might be a "good thing," but it's not what the Psalmist has in mind.
 - This also does not mean we won't do without sometimes. Even within this Psalm, David "cried" because of lack (6) and "many are the afflictions of the righteous" (19). When we are afflicted, we "lack" a particular good thing: comfort. So David is not preaching a prosperity gospel in Psalm 34. Seasons of want will be part of the Christian life. Rather, David is assuring us that every good thing we need, God will give.
 - If we don't have something that we prayed sufficiently for, it is because God in His sovereignty decreed otherwise. In this case, too, we lack no good thing because God providentially ordained our lack to produce something good (cf. James 1:2-4).
 - On that note, sometimes God provides the character we lack by allowing us to lack. Suffering generates character, far more than prosperity (Rom. 5:3-5; Heb. 5:8; etc.). So we should be careful about complaining that we "lack" some "good thing." It very well could be that God is providing, through our lack, something greater: holiness.

11 Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

—Verse 11 marks a shift in the Psalm, from a hymn of praise (1-10) to a wisdom psalm (11-22). It's unusual for one psalm to contain both, but David mashes them together.

—The exhortation to "children" reflects this rich wisdom tradition. Proverbs is part of wisdom literature, and it is written from a father to a son (or, in Proverbs 31, from a mother to a son). God intends wisdom to be passed down generationally (Deut. 6:5-7). Nevertheless, we should not limit "children" to biological

offspring. Spiritual children receive wisdom from those older in the faith, and that's what David intends here. He is imparting the wisdom of experience—wisdom is never just theoretical—to his spiritual descendants. Only fathers and mothers in the faith possess such wisdom for it is gained by years that "children" haven't yet lived.

—Wisdom psalms tend to reflect on the nature of wisdom, on the fate of the righteous versus the wicked, on God's law, and they are more didactic in style (they directly instruct the audience). See Psalms 1, 14, 37, 73, 91, 112, 119, 128.

—"I will teach you the fear of the LORD":

- Ross: "praise offered for some act of divine intervention must include exhortations for the people of God. It is what makes praise edifying."
- The fear of the LORD is central to wisdom literature, for "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Pr. 1:7). In God's introduction to His Book of Wisdom, He tells us the key to unlock the whole book: the fear of the LORD. Without it, His practical counsel for raising kids, managing resources, planning for the future, and choosing a spouse—mean nothing.
- So far, Psalm 34 has mentioned the fear of God in verses 6 ("The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him") and 9 ("O, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack"). In this section of the Psalm, David moves from extolling the blessings for God-fearers to explaining what it looks like practically to live this out.

12 What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? 13 Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. 14 Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

—We might have expected him to say, "Let me teach you the fear of the LORD: spend more time meditating, cultivating a sense of awe, and focusing on intensely spiritual things." Instead, he gets practical.

—The fear of God is essentially practical. Wisdom is skill at living life, and fearing God is the foundation for it. If someone says, "I fear God," but does not live it out practically, that person is self-deceived.

—The opening question focuses on how to live a long life. This is a consistent promise of the Proverbs: if we live a moral life, we will live a long life. These Proverbs are not handed down to us as promises—as though every moral person will live a long life without exception (Jesus died at 33!)—but rather as general maxims. It is generally true that the abusive, rebellious, violent, murderous, addict dies before his time, while the generous, humble, kind, self-controlled individual lives longer.

—Jesus gave His life for us so we might have eternal life on the basis of faith and not works. True faith, however, works. The Bible is full of moral commands. And while we never want to emphasize our works more than God's work in Christ, our work does still matter. A lot. God's moral law is written on the universe and on every human heart. Those who break it suffer. Those who endeavor to keep it are blessed.

—"tongue... lips": speech is a huge part of wisdom literature. Those who fear God display it with their tongue. If our tongue is full of venom, our heart does not fear God. If our heart fears God, our tongue—untamable though it may be (James 3)—is a tree of life.

—"turn away from evil and do good": don't just abstain from wrong things; do right things. Don't just stop getting drunk; soberly serve others. Don't just settle for pietistic abstinence from wrong things; intentionally bless hurting people. Don't just lay your sins at the cross; pick up the righteous cause of Christ. Our righteousness is not just defined by what we stop doing, but what we start doing. I'm reminded of Isaiah 1:16-17: *"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."* Not only does God require us to remove our evil deeds, but to multiply our good ones: acts of blessing for hurting people.

—"seek peace and pursue it": reconciled relationships are also a big theme of the Proverbs. The priority is not merely to forgive, but to reconcile. This is not always possible, but it should be aimed for. Where abuse is involved, one should seek outside counsel/pastoring to know how to proceed.

—Again, I am struck by how practical this is. Everyone wants to jump on the first part of the Psalm and say, "Yes! I want to taste and see God's goodness! Yes! I want the angel of the LORD's protection! Yes! I want to 'lack nothing'!"... This requires the fear of the LORD—which, as we've seen, approximates trusting the LORD, seeking the LORD, and looking to the LORD—and which expresses itself practically in making hard choices. The blessed life is a hard life. But in the end, it's a better life.

—Peter quotes these verses in 1 Peter 3:8-16: *Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the*

contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

—Peter's point for Christians is that they will "obtain a blessing" if they live the life advised by Psalm 34, which he depicts as "righteousness" (1 Pet. 3:14). Peter then adds that even if we suffer for righteousness, it does not discount the message of Psalm 34, for even then, our persecution is a blessing (cf. Mt. 5).

—We are not saved by being righteous, but we are blessed for living righteously!

—Kidner: "the good you enjoy (12) goes hand in hand with the good you do (14). It is an emphasis which answers the suspicion (first aroused in Eden) that outside the will of God, rather than within it, lies enrichment."

15 The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry. 16 The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

—Our Father in heaven does not have literal human eyes, but He does see; He does not have literal human ears, but He does hear. His eyes are toward us, not in the sense that He scrutinizes us for error, but in the sense that He is watching out for us, looking to bless us. Those who "look to him" (34:5), are favorably looked upon. Those who "listen" to divine wisdom (34:11) will have their cry heard. If we refuse to look to God or listen to God, why should He look favorably upon us or listen to us?

—The "eyes" of the LORD and the "ears" of the LORD feed into our next metaphor: "the face of the LORD". Each "anthropomorphism" (assigning human characteristics to God) depicts His favor (or disfavor) in different ways. "Eyes" depicts His favor, in terms of His watchful care; "ears" depict His favor, in terms of His responsiveness; "face" depicts His disfavor in this case, for it is turned "against" the wicked. Implicitly, God's eyes and ears turn with His face, suggesting that God will not carefully watch over the wicked with His "eyes" or respond to their cry with His "ears." The privileged friendship we enjoy with God, where He so intimately cares for us, the wicked do not receive.

—But it gets worse. Not only do they not receive favor from God in this life, but He will "cut off the memory of them from the earth." Those whom God remembers will be remembered forever, but those who forget God will be forgotten forever.

—I'm reminded of God's promise to Abraham—"I will make your name great"—and the subsequent statements made by God about Him: "for the sake of My servant Abraham..." God remembered Abraham, and today, we are still talking about him. So it will be for all the righteous, throughout all eternity. Our stories will not die with us. Like us, they will live forever. Our testimonies will be told and re-told, to God's glory.

—In context, David is telling us about his own answer to prayer. God was attentive to David's cry, even though he hadn't been fully righteous (explained above—his lies to the priest in the preceding narrative, 1 Sam. 21:2, 8). It seems, however, that David turned to God (Ps. 56), and then God turned to him. David's story reminds us that the blessed life is not tethered to perfect obedience. God is looking on the heart. The wisdom of Psalm 34 explains some of the troubles we fall into, as well as the way out. Sometimes we dig a hole for ourselves, but God in His mercy will pull His kids out of the hole if we only turn back to Him.

17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. 19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. 20 He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.

—The theme of deliverance continues to be prominent in this song.

—While it's not the same Hebrew word, the word "cry" or "cried" appears often in this song. When we are in desperate straits, God is not distant, as He can seem. He hears.

—"delivers them out of all their troubles... delivers him out of them all (afflictions)":

- This promise seems like too much. Clearly God allows afflictions (19), but how can He ultimately deliver us from them "all"?
- An answer can be found in Jesus' instruction to His disciples about the end times in Luke 21:16-18:
You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you

they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish.

- How can Jesus say both of these statements? How can we be “put to death” yet not “perish”? The Bible speaks with eternity in view. In David’s day, eternal life was understood hazily, but he does repeatedly affirm statements like that of Ps. 23:6, that he will “ *dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*”
- We who love God will often experience “salvations” from troubles of many kinds, but even if we don’t experience earthly salvation—we all die eventually—we will receive eternal salvation. In this sense, with regard to “troubles,” God delivers us “out of them all.”

—“cry for help... troubles... brokenhearted... crushed in spirit... afflictions... broken”: each of these poetically describes the same situation—a need for deliverance—in varied terms. When life brings us “troubles” and “afflictions,” and when our “bones” threaten to break, and when our “spirit” feels so “crushed” that we whimper and “cry” like a baby—God “delivers.”

—“hears... delivers... near... saves... delivers... keeps”: just as David poetically describes our need for deliverance, he likewise multiplies words to depict its arrival. God is not distant but rather “near” enough to “hear” our cry, merciful enough to “save” and “deliver,” and powerful enough that He “keeps” all our “bones.”

—Verses 17 and 19 are parallel, with both speaking of how God delivers us out of all trouble. Verse 17 emphasizes the “cry” (response) of the righteous, while verse 19 focuses on the “many... afflictions” (experience) of the righteous. The righteous—those in covenant with God—respond to affliction, not merely by crying, but with a “cry for help.” Righteousness does not prevent our “many... afflictions,” and in fact, it might cause some. But those who love God cry to Him for help. We bring our pain to God. The message of these parallel verses is that despite our many and varied afflictions, our response, and God’s response is the same: we cry; He helps.

—Verses 18 and 20 are likewise parallel, with both speaking of how God cares for us in our suffering. Verse 18 depicts our inward suffering—“brokenhearted... crushed in spirit”—and verse 20 our outward suffering—“bones.” In both cases, God does not fail to draw near. He cares not just about all of His people, but about the whole person: inside and out. He cares for our physical bodies and our inner psychology.

—“broken-hearted... crushed in spirit”: Since “brokenhearted” parallels “crushed in spirit,” the term refers not merely to someone enduring a bad breakup, but to someone whose “will to go on” feels “crushed.” In Scripture, the heart is the seat of thoughts, will, beliefs, and emotions. It is the control center of our lives. To be brokenhearted, here, is to want to give up. At the moment we want to give up—when we feel God’s greatest distance—He is “near”.

—“keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken”:

- While in its original form, the verse promises physical protection to God’s people, this verse was fulfilled literally for Jesus on the Cross:
 - John 19:31-36: *Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: **"Not one of his bones will be broken."***
 - That Ps. 34:20 depicts a fulfillment of Christ’s crucifixion, it also suggests that He fulfills the rest of the Psalm. Just as David was rejected by a Philistine ruler, so was Jesus rejected by a Roman one. Both were rescued, but Jesus is our Better David, for David was in Philistia because of his own sin; Jesus was in Rome because of ours. Jesus perfectly kept His tongue from evil, refusing to revile His enemies, but rather to bless them. He sought peace and pursued it, but we crucified Him. When He was brokenhearted and crushed in spirit, “this poor man cried” and God heard. Jesus tasted the bitter gall they offered, and He tasted death for everyone, but He also tasted and saw the goodness of God. God kept all of His bones, despite the custom of breaking them at the Cross. Just as Israel did not break the bones of the Passover Lamb, Jesus is our Better Passover Lamb. When we place our trust in Him, smearing His blood across the doorstep of our heart, He passes over our sins. Then He invites us to magnify the Lord with Him and then follow in His path, the path of

true “many afflictions,” yet the path of wisdom.

—Spurgeon: “The same Lord who sends the afflictions will also recall them when his design is accomplished, but he will never allow the fiercest of them to rend and devour his beloved.”

21 Affliction will slay 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.

—Sometimes psalms pronounce curses on others, but this one merely states fact.

—“the wicked... those who hate the righteous”: these are parallel. He presents the righteous and wicked in such stark terms that those who are outside the covenant will inevitably despise those inside of it. We are reminded of New Testament texts like, “Everyone who is not for Me is against Me.”

—“affliction” (Heb. *ra'*):

- This word is repeated throughout Psalm 34, although it is not translated the same every time. Each instance listed below:
 - 13 Keep your tongue from *evil* and your lips from speaking deceit.
 - 14 Turn away from *evil* and do good; seek peace and pursue it.
 - 16 The face of the LORD is against those who do *evil*, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.
 - 19 Many are the *afflictions* of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.
 - 21 **Affliction will slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.**
- The word can be translated as “evil”—as in moral evil—or “affliction”, which is morally neutral, yet similarly dark.
- Of the major translations, only the ESV translates verse 21 as “affliction.” The rest translated it as, “evil will slay the wicked.” Both are true.
- I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s statement, “Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds” (2 Tim. 4:14).
- As believers, we are to turn away from *ra'* (evil), but we can’t prevent *ra'* (affliction) from visiting us. Even when it does, however, the Lord delivers us from *ra'* (affliction). In contrast, He hands the wicked over to *ra'* (evil/affliction).
- We cannot control when *ra'* (affliction) visits us, but we can control whether we participate in *ra'* (evil). People of faith realize that there is a direct correlation between *ra'* (affliction) and *ra'* (evil). Those who pursue the latter ultimately suffer the latter.

—“redeems... [won’t be] condemned”: to redeem means to liberate. In this case, we are liberated from the judgment of the wicked (not “condemned”), which manifests in their lives as affliction.

—“takes refuge”: the righteous are those who take refuge in God, which means trust Him for deliverance. While the Psalm focuses strongly on righteous behavior, the core of righteous behavior is trust in the Righteous One. When we trust God for salvation, this manifests in a holy lifestyle.

—Kidner: “The Christian can echo the jubilant spirit of the psalm with added gratitude, knowing the unimaginable cost of 22a and the unbounded scope of 22b.”

COMMUNITY GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Based on verses 1-3:

- David praises God for his miraculous deliverance. Why do we so easily forget to thank and praise God when we experience breakthrough?
- David praises God continually, verbally, and corporately. Which of these is the biggest struggle for you to practice?

Based on verses 4-6:

- What deliverance are you crying out for right now more than anything?
- What is your favorite answer to prayer that you’ve ever experienced?
- What does it do for your soul to know that the angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him?

Based on verses 8-10:

- Why do you think verse 8 has resonated with so many people throughout the centuries?
- Which do you struggle to trust God more for: protection (“refuge”, v. 8) or provision (no lack, v. 9, 10)?

Based on verses 11-22:

- Why is the fear of the LORD a foundation for practical living? (esp. vv. 11-14)

- When was a time you felt God's nearness, even in your brokenness? (esp. v. 18)
- Why might broken people actually find hope in the judgment of God? (esp. vv. 21-22)