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ENJOYING GOD AND HIS BLESSINGS

Psalm 34

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Enjoying God and His Blessings Psalm 34

A question that I often ask those who come to me for counsel is, "Do you want God's blessing in your life?" On the surface, it sounds like a no-brainer. "Duh! *Of course* I want God's blessing in my life! Do you think I'm stupid, or what?" But answering yes to that question commits you to an often-difficult way of life. God does not bless those that ignore His commandments and live to please themselves. He blesses those that fear Him and walk in His ways, turning from their sins. Now, do you *really* want God's blessing in your life?

David did. In spite of his many failures and sometimes flagrant sins, he kept coming back to the Lord, repenting of his sins, and seeking God as his chief joy and treasure. David wasn't just, as so many do, trying to milk God for His blessings, but continuing to live for his own selfish ends. Rather, David saw God Himself as the supreme blessing. He would agree with what Asaph wrote (Ps. 73:25), "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth." In Psalm 34, David tells us how to enjoy God and His blessings:

To enjoy God and His blessings, seek Him for salvation,
fear Him, and walk in His ways.

Psalm 34 is an acrostic, with each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Interestingly, as in Psalm 25, one letter (vav) is missing and the final verse interrupts the sequence, thus making it stand out for emphasis. As with all acrostics, the outline is not as clear as in some other psalms. Derek Kidner (*Psalms 1-72* [IVP], pp. 138, 140) outlines it broadly as, "Rejoice with me" (vv. 1-10) and "Learn from me" (vv. 11-22). The first section is David's testimony; the second section is his teaching. Addressing his audience as "children" (34:11) was a common way for Hebrew teachers to address their pupils.

The psalm comes out of an embarrassing incident in David's life. He was running from King Saul, who was seeking to kill him.

He came famished to Ahimelech the priest, who gave him and his men the consecrated bread. David also took Goliath's sword, which had been stored at the Tabernacle. An informant told Saul where David was at, so he had to flee again. This time, perhaps in panic, he fled from Israeli territory and went to Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. It's rather bizarre, because Gath was the hometown of Goliath, whom David had killed! So here is David, carrying Goliath's sword (which could hardly be camouflaged!), showing up in Goliath's town! Achish, by the way, is referred to in the Psalm inscription as Abimelech, which was a dynastic title for Philistine kings (it means, "my father is king"), much as Pharaoh was a title for Egyptian kings.

David wasn't long in Gath before the servants of Achish said, "Isn't this David, of whom the Israelis sing, 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?'" (See 1 Sam. 21:11.) So, fearing that he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire, David panicked. He decided to act like an insane man, scribbling on the city gate and drooling into his beard. Achish fell for the ruse. He sarcastically asked his men (1 Sam. 21:15), "Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this one into my presence?" And so by his deception, David was enabled to escape. But his acting like a madman had dishonored God in front of these pagans.

But then he wrote this psalm, praising *God* for his deliverance and denouncing deception (Ps. 34:13). What's going on here? It seems that in reflecting back later on this close escape from death, David realized that in spite of his failure, God had been gracious in rescuing him anyway. True, David had been in a very tight spot, but that did not justify his deception. He actually continued this pattern of deception with Achish, convincing him that he was raiding Israeli villages, when he actually was slaughtering off the inhabitants of the land (1 Sam. 27:8-12). This almost resulted in David's being forced to go into battle with the Philistines against his own countrymen. It also resulted in the capture of David's and his men's wives and property, so that his own men were talking of stoning him (1 Sam. 30:6).

So sometime after David recovered from all of these difficult trials caused by his own panic and deception, he penned Psalm 34. He realizes now that deception and evil are *not* the way to the good

life. Rather, seeking God for deliverance, fearing Him, and walking in His ways are the way to enjoy God and His blessings.

Even some conservative commentators have said that the psalm does not bear any resemblance to the circumstances alluded to in the title. But there are connections that can be made. In verses 4-6 David alludes to the extreme danger that he was in. Some may ask, "How can he say that he cried out to the Lord for deliverance when he was using deception to get out of this jam?" The answer is that he did both. It is rare, especially for younger believers, to be completely pure in our methods, especially when we're in a sudden crisis. So the psalm is a testimony to God's grace in bearing with our weaknesses. This does not justify our sin, but it does magnify God's grace towards his weak children.

Further allusions to David's situation include verse 7, which pictures the angel of the Lord guarding David's camp at the cave of Adullam, where he fled from Achish. Verse 10 refers to the lions that inhabited the area. Some commentators take this as a poetic reference to powerful, rapacious human leaders. But it would be natural for David to refer to the hungry lions that he saw around him, contrasting them with God's care for him and his men. Verses 13 and 18 reflect David's later repentance as he thought back on his panicked use of deception. And, verse 20 reflects David's safe escape from the Philistines. He was probably handled roughly, but he got away with no broken bones.

We can draw four practical lessons from this psalm:

1. The life that God blesses is not free from extreme trials.

This is a psalm about close escapes from death. We see this in the psalm title. It is also evident in verses 6 & 7 and 17 & 19. Verse 19 states plainly, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous...." I bring this up because I often encounter Christians who think, "I trusted in Christ as my Savior and I'm trying to follow Him. So why am I having all of these trials?" They mistakenly think that following Christ means that He puts a protective shield around you, so that trials just glance off. But Paul told the young converts in the churches he founded (Acts 14:22), "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Peter wrote to a suffering church (1 Pet. 4:12), "Beloved, do not be surprised at the

fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as if some strange thing were happening to you." Note three things:

A. Some trials are due to our own sins and shortcomings.

We have already seen this with David. He may have fled to Achish in panic without pausing to seek the Lord. His later trials when his and his men's families and possessions were taken were a direct result of his wrongful thinking that he would perish at the hand of Saul (1 Sam. 27:1). Later, David watched his own family fall apart and his kingdom go through Absalom's rebellion as the consequence of his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12). He also saw many in his kingdom die as a direct consequence of his sin in numbering the people (2 Sam. 24:10-17).

The important lesson is to learn how to respond when God brings into your life these consequences for your sins. It's easy to minimize your own responsibility for the sins by blaming others or by excusing yourself, and then to get angry at God. You can think, "What I did was no worse than what everyone else does. Besides, if I hadn't been provoked, I wouldn't have done this. So it's not fair for God to discipline me when others do far worse and get away with it."

Or, you can humble yourself before God, as David did, with a brokenhearted, contrite spirit (Ps. 34:18). You can submit to God's dealings with you, as difficult as they are (2 Sam. 16:5-13).

B. Some trials are due to the sins of others against us.

David got into this jam with Achish and the Philistines because Saul was wrongly trying to kill him. David had done nothing to undermine Saul's authority or leadership. He had been loyal to Saul, serving him as a son. And yet Saul was insanely jealous of David and was trying to kill him.

Again, it is important how you respond when someone else has sinned against you in a terrible way. Perhaps your father molested you. Or your parents may have abused you verbally and physically. Or, a trusted friend betrayed you. Or, you were sabotaged at work by unscrupulous co-workers who got you fired, even though you were a conscientious, hard worker. Do you take refuge in the Lord and pray for those that wronged you? Do you recognize that if God had not been gracious to you, you would be acting

just as they acted or worse? When we're sinned against, we need to be very careful not to sin in reaction.

- C. When we turn to the Lord in our trials, He can use even our past sins for His holy purposes.

This is not in any way to say, "Let's sin so that grace may increase" (Rom. 6:1)! Rather, it is to recognize that God is the God of the second (and third and fourth) chance. The Bible is full of stories of those whose disobedience God used to teach us and to further His holy purposes. Here is David, teaching us not to use deception as he did. Jacob's story shows us the same thing. Jonah's story shows us God's grace in using the disobedient prophet. Peter's denials and restoration have encouraged most of us when we have failed the Lord.

So whether your trials are due to your own sin or to the sin of others against you or due to living in a fallen world, don't let those trials cause you to turn away from the Lord in bitterness. Rather, let them push you to the Lord for deliverance and grace.

- 2. Our trials should drive us to the end of ourselves so that we seek the Lord for salvation as we fear Him and learn to walk in His ways.

We can break this down into four components:

- A. To come to the end of ourselves, we must be broken-hearted and contrite over our sins.

David is boasting here (34:2), but not in himself. He is boasting in the Lord, which means that he recognizes that he is the object of God's undeserved favor (see 1 Cor. 1:26-31). As a result, the humble (those who also recognize that they are recipients of grace) will rejoice with him as he tells of God's deliverance. So David concludes (34:18), "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

John Bunyan wrote an entire book titled, *The Acceptable Sacrifice, or The Excellency of a Broken Heart* (in his *Works* [Baker], 1:685-720; also, published separately by Banner of Truth). I cannot recommend it highly enough! (I put a page full of quotes on the back of today's bulletin and also on the church web site.) Bunyan goes into great detail to spell out what a broken heart and a contrite

spirit consist of, so that we can evaluate our own hearts before God to make sure that we are broken and contrite. While we grow in brokenness before the Lord over time, if we have never been broken and contrite before Him, we are not truly saved.

While I cannot begin to condense all of Bunyan's gems into one sermon, let alone one paragraph, let me summarize how he explains the two terms, broken and contrite. To have your heart broken means "to have it lamed, disabled, and taken off by sense of God's wrath due to sin, from that course of life it formerly was conversant in" (1:695). As for a contrite spirit, it "is a penitent one; one sorely grieved, and deeply sorrowful, for the sins it has committed against God, and to the damage of the soul" (*ibid.*).

Further, the brokenhearted man sees himself to be a poor man, as David here acknowledges himself to be (34:6). Jesus picked up on this theme when He said (Matt. 5:3-4), "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Bunyan's treatise is primarily based on David's cry after his sin with Bathsheba (Ps. 51:17), "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." Isaiah also writes about a broken and contrite heart (57:15): "For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" If you need reviving, it begins with a broken and contrite heart! (See also, Isa. 61:1; 66:2.)

- B. Our brokenness should drive us to seek the Lord for salvation and take refuge in Him.

Until you realize that you are broken beyond your own ability to fix, you will not cry out to God for salvation from your sin. As long as you think that your own goodness or works will get your life put back together, you will not see yourself as a poor man (or woman), crying out to God to save you (34:6). As God opens your eyes to the seriousness of your sin, let it drive you to the cross for God's salvation. Although David may have hid in a cave from Saul and from the Philistines, in his heart he was hiding in God as his refuge (34:8). Are you? Have you come to the place of feeling bro-

ken and crushed by your sin, so that you have cried out to God to save you through Jesus and His shed blood?

C. To experience God's salvation, we must fear Him.

David feared Saul and he feared the Philistines. But he testifies (34:4), "I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears." He goes on to state (34:7), "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them." Further (34:9), "O fear the Lord, you His saints; for to those who fear Him there is no want." Again (34:11), "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord." Fearing God is inextricably bound up with experiencing His salvation.

I read somewhere last year that a professor at a Christian college mentioned fearing God in his classroom. He said it expecting that all the students would agree that we are to fear God. But he was stunned when they all vigorously disagreed that as Christians we should fear God! They argued that God's love excludes all need to fear Him! While it is true that perfect love casts out the fear of punishment (1 John 4:18), it is also abundantly clear that we are always to fear God in the sense of bowing in reverent awe before Him. Even the saints need to be exhorted to fear God (Ps. 34:9)! If you do not fear Him, you will not take refuge in Him.

D. To fear the Lord is to live in obedience to Him.

Throughout this psalm, there is an emphasis on being righteous, which means, to obey the Lord. David addresses his readers as "saints" (or, "holy ones"), which is somewhat unusual in the Old Testament (Willem VanGemeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 5:284). He exhorts us to "depart from evil and do good" (34:14). He assures us (34:15) that "the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and His ears are open to their cry." Most scholars also take verse 17 to be referring to the cry of the righteous (the Hebrew word "righteous" is lacking). He also mentions the righteous in verses 19 & 21.

By contrast, David states (34:16), "The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the memory of them from the earth." Further (34:21), "Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned." So either God's eyes are towards us favorably because we obey Him (34:15), or His face is against us

because we disobey Him (34:16, 21). At the root of obeying the Lord is fearing Him. As Proverbs 8:13 states, "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil." Fearing Him leads to obeying Him, which leads to enjoying God and experiencing His blessings.

3. When we experience God's blessings, He expects us to share it with others and to invite them to experience God's blessings, too.

The entire psalm repeats the theme, "I've received God's blessings; you can, too!" Verse 3, "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together." In verses 4-10, the idea is, "God rescued me; He can rescue you, too!" Thus, the invitation (34:8), "O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!" Don't just look on, wishing that my blessings were yours. Taste the Lord's goodness yourself! Prove in your own experience that the Lord saves all that take refuge in Him. Or, again, based on David's experience of not being in want of any good thing (34:10), he invites his readers to listen as he teaches them about the truly good life (34:11, 12).

Praise is best when it is shared. Have you ever stood alone at the rim of the Grand Canyon, admiring the spectacular view, when a stranger walks up? It's hard not to say, "Isn't this amazing!" Why? Because praise is meant to be shared. In verse 5, David says that those that looked to the Lord were radiant. The Hebrew word is used (Isa. 60:5) of a mother's face lighting up with joy when her children, given up for lost, return home. She can't hide her delight. When you've experienced God's salvation, your face should be radiant when you think about your Savior! And you should want to share your praise with others in joyful song.

But the psalm states that God delivers the righteous from *all* of his afflictions (34:19). "He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken" (34:20). John (19:36) cites this verse (or Exod. 12:46) as applying to Jesus not having His legs broken on the cross. Yet Jesus was not delivered; He died. We all know of many of God's faithful servants who have not been delivered from all of their afflictions. Many have not only had their bones broken, but they have been brutally killed for the gospel. Thus we must consider a final point:

4. The ultimate experience of God's blessing and salvation will not be in this life, but in the life to come.

The final verses (19-22) must find their ultimate fulfillment beyond death, when God will finally justify His servants and condemn the wicked. These verses make obvious what the Bible clearly teaches throughout, that there is a great divide between those whom God redeems and those whom God will condemn. The Hebrew word for "condemned" (34:21, 22) means to bear one's guilt (Kidner, p. 141). It is the opposite of being justified. "Those who hate the righteous will be condemned" (34:21b). "None of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned" (34:22b). Those are the only options! Make sure that you've taken refuge in Jesus Christ! "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Critics scoff, "That's just pie in the sky when you die!" My response is, what will you have in the sky when you die? We're all going to die. The question is, where will you spend eternity? If Jesus is not bodily risen from the dead, you don't need to worry about it, because there is no eternity (1 Cor. 15:12-19). But if He is risen, you had better make sure that He has redeemed your soul and rescued you from God's righteous judgment!

Conclusion

So, how many of you want God's blessing in your life? No, don't raise your hands. Rather, repent of your sins. Ask God for a broken and contrite heart. Cry out to Jesus for salvation. Then, live by fearing Him and walking in His ways. You'll be blessed!

Application Questions

1. Why do so many Christians think that following Christ brings exemption from trials? Why is this view spiritually dangerous?
2. How does a person who lacks a broken and contrite heart get one? How would you counsel such a person?
3. Why do so few Christians live in the fear of God? Have we over-emphasized His love?
4. Why is it not a cop-out to say that our final blessing and salvation only comes in heaven?

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