

Psalm 34

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[0 : 00] 4, which you're going to be looking at this evening, Psalm 34. I'm just going to read that psalm.

It's an interesting introduction to the psalm in my version because it's the psalm of David. It's when he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away. And he left.

But this is what he said. I will extol the Lord at all times. His praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord.

Let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me. Let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and he answered me.

He delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant. Their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called and the Lord heard him.

[1 : 07] He saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and he delivers them. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him like nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord like no good thing.

Come, my children. Listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies.

Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry.

The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. The righteous cry out and the Lord hears them.

[2 : 12] He delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.

He protects all his bones. Not one of them will be broken. Evil will slay the wicked. The foes of the righteous will be condemned. The Lord redeems his servants.

No one will be condemned who takes refuge in him. Amen. Well, it would be useful to have that psalm open in front of you.

As I've already alluded to, this psalm is probably known for many things, but that verse which that song was based on is probably one of those which is maybe the most memorable, which says that we are to taste and see that the Lord is good.

There was a story told by some missionaries, which I think is likely to be true, that they were talking with a young boy, and in the context of the conversation they were having, they wanted to give this little boy something because he was very poor and had nothing, and they gave him a small bag of sweets.

[3 : 40] And so he popped one in his mouth, and boy, did he enjoy it. And so he took it away. Now this is maybe, I give you this story, partly because it's appropriate to what I want to say, but also I think it illustrates sometimes what we don't know about different situations around the world.

We've been hearing about Nigeria, and we've had some sort of an insight into what goes on over there, but in reality there's so much that we don't know that even what we have heard, we might think we've got the full picture, but in fact it's much more than that.

And this little story sort of gives that illustration because this little boy went back to his tribal group and he said to them, I've just been given this sweet by one of these missionaries.

And all the other children said, well, what does it taste like? And he had no way of explaining what it tasted like because he'd never had a sweet before.

He didn't know what sweets tasted like. So what did he do? He said, well, you better have one and taste it for yourselves because it was only when they tasted it for themselves they could see what he was trying to explain to them because he didn't have the words to talk about what a fruit sweet was like.

[5 : 12] How would you explain it to someone who'd never tasted anything like that before? And it's the same in a way with that particular verse. So when we're saying, oh, taste and see that the Lord is good, it's one of those things that certainly as a preacher you have to say to people and even when we're witnessing to them, well, look, it's no good me telling you about it.

I can't really explain what it means to have a living faith in Christ because the words can't do justice to what's going on in my heart and soul. You've got to taste it for yourself and see you've got to have a relationship with Christ which is so close and so personal that only at that point will you really understand what it means.

Now sadly, as my wife points out to me often, I could go on, but I won't. I'm going to leave that verse there, but that, if you like, is the taster for what I want to think about tonight because in this particular passage, I want to focus just on three verses for our encouragement really and to make us think about our walk with the Lord.

And I've put it under headings to help you to remember. One, I've had to, let's say, use an unusual word, but since I'm a mathematician, I'm allowed to use it and I will explain to you afterwards what it means in the context of the sermon.

Because in these three verses that I'm going to look at, we're going to look at a God who is attentive, adjacent, apologies for that one, and an advocate for the people.

[6 : 55] So, let's look at these in turn. Let's look at the attentive God first. This comes up in verse 15 of this psalm. The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cries.

See, I didn't make it up. The word is actually there. He's an attentive God. And I just want us to tease that out a little bit in terms of what it means to us and how that might apply to us.

If you've ever been in a family and you've been sitting with a mum in particular who's just got a newborn, you can put your hands up if you want, when I've explained the situation as to whether you've experienced this, but you can be sitting having a conversation, a full-blown conversation, very detailed about whatever it would be, and perhaps the television's on or some music's on at the same time and perhaps you're eating a meal and the kettle's boiling in the kitchen and suddenly the mother will say, Sandra's crying.

And what is Sandra's crying? Sandra's the little girl who's up in the bedroom with, you know, insulation, soundproofing, carpets, whatever, and yet mum still hears that little cry.

And even more than that, they can sometimes make the difference between what is a cry, when they cry and say, oh, it's all right, she's not hungry yet, or she's not really hurting, she's just complaining a bit that she's been left alone.

[8 : 38] But sometimes mum gets up very quickly and rushes up to the bedroom because this is a real cry, because baby really is hungry, or really is in pain, and mums seem to know it, don't they?

And no matter what the babble, whatever the confusion, whatever the sound is around, mum understands whether the baby needs help or whether for the moment they can just be left because the danger isn't there.

Because on the surface of it, this lady who's talking to guests, cooking the food, listening to some music, and doing 101 other things like ladies do, men can only do one at a time.

But ladies can multitask and do 100 things at once. And in amongst all those 100 things, their most attentive piece of their heart, their brain, and personal psyche is geared to that child.

So they can hear even the smallest sound that others can't hear. And this verse tells us that the Lord is like that with his people.

[9 : 53] It's not just that when the people in trouble, as Danny and Catherine were talking about, that they cry out to God and he hears them. It's not just that suddenly he hears a sound and then reacts to it.

He's actively listening to find out if there is any trouble. If there's anything that needs to be done now or whether it could be done later.

Does that person need help or do they not? The psalmist understood this because when he talks a little bit later, he says, the righteous cry out and the Lord hears them and he says he delivers them from all their troubles and he talks about various people.

And yet at the start of this psalm, when he's talking about himself, this poor man, the psalmist talking about himself, this poor man called and the Lord heard him.

This was the psalmist's own testimony that this is exactly what was true for him. The Lord heard him and answered his prayer. And surely the application of that, if we want to think about how that would affect us in our lives, must be that just as Paul was opening his heart here to the Lord, as he was praying and as we pray tonight, what would be the difference between the sort of prayer that we might normally ask and the one that is needed here.

[11 : 30] Because sometimes, if we take the illustration I gave, when baby makes that cry and mum says, oh, that's not a hungry cry, they cry again.

No, that's not a pain cry, this is something else, it's not serious yet, I'm not going yet, I'll carry on my conversation for the moment and then suddenly when they hear the need that they're listening for, then they go.

People often say, well, why is it that God doesn't answer our prayers? We know that God does. But why isn't it now? We just prayed, why hasn't something happened now?

Well, surely, it's to make us think of maybe how we pray, how should we be praying? I don't know, I've been to lots of prayer meetings and I've prayed myself at home, but I wonder if our prayers, thinking about the situation even though we've heard about tonight, I'm sure that the people in Nigeria, when Boko Haram are outside the door, or whether they're threatening to come here, I'm sure their prayers would be these things which I've written down here, they'd be urgent, they'd be pleading with God and they'd be expectant, they'd be waiting for God to do something because their need was immediate.

Maybe we need to consider how we pray so that when we pray, we pray with that sort of urgency, we pray with that sort of pleading and we pray with expectation that God will answer.

[13 : 11] Well, we know that God does answer in his own time, but surely we must think about our own prayers and how we come before God because God is listening for them.

He's being attentive to what we say and what we pray about. We must pray and pray urgently. Urgently. Doesn't the Bible say if we pray anything in Jesus' name, I will do it.

So why should we doubt? So this is an attentive God but also is an adjacent God. Now this is where I've got to ask you a question. I'm a teacher after all. What does adjacent mean?

Think back to maths at school and geometry. It means next to. It means next to. And if we go to our text and we look at a bit later on in this passage, it says the Lord is close to the broken hearted.

You could almost translate it is next to the broken hearted. And it goes on. Not just the broken hearted, it says it saves those who are crushed in spirit. They may not be physically injured but they might be crushed in spirit.

[14 : 32] And this is as the Lord gets next to somebody. That's in common speech today, isn't it? We talk about people who get next to another individual. In other words, they show them friendship, they show them compassion, they show them comfort, they get next to them so close almost if you like that they can put their arms around them and gather them in and befriend them.

And there's that context here in what the Lord does. He says he's close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. And that isn't just now for the Christian, for the believer, this is forever.

For eternity. It isn't just one off, it's not well you're in trouble now, I'll get next to you and then when you're okay, I'll leave you again. No, the Bible talks as if the Lord is with us and we know this and we understand it all the time.

He's next to us, he's ready as it were to put his arm round us to draw us in. At the end of Matthew's Gospel as the Lord's leaving the disciples and he knows they'll be broken hearted that he's leaving them.

And what he said to them was, behold, I am with you always to the very end of the age. And then of course he promised them that the Holy Spirit would come.

[16 : 09] Now, I don't know whether you ever, if you're working, you've probably never seen this programme, but sometimes, because occasionally, I'm not working these days, I catch a programme which is on a particular time each day which is called Long Lost Family.

I won't ask you to put your hands up and embarrass yourselves in front of everybody, but it is a programme that's on daytime TV and it's one of those programmes which can be harrowing because there's always someone who's lost a brother, a sister, a child, a mother or father sometime in the past, maybe 30, 40 years previously and they're desperately trying to find them and because it's a television programme, ultimately, they don't pick them if they're never going to find the person, they do eventually find them and then, you have this coming together and there are tears and there's, you know, weeping and, you know, they're all falling into each other's arms and then it tells you a bit about how things went after that.

Well, when these programmes are on, the joy that they have when they find this person is absolutely amazing and often, they've been searching for this person for years and years and years.

Sometimes, they have a sense of guilt because they feel they've done something wrong, either to break a relationship or maybe it's something to do with how they were separated when the child, perhaps, and the mother were younger.

but, what is clear from all of these stories is that that person has had a lifetime quest to find that individual.

[17 : 56] They've researched it, they've gone to Somerset House, they've got all the records, they've followed family histories through, they've phoned various people, they've visited different parts of the country to see if they can find out anything about this person.

They've talked to everybody they could possibly think of who's got any sort of relationship with that person in order to try and find them. And then, ultimately, when they do find them, it's a tremendous thing.

Well, of course, as I say, the Lord knew when he left this earth that the disciples would be bereft because he was their master, he was their Lord and he was going and so he sent them the Holy Spirit but again, thinking of ourselves, surely, reading this, we must think about our own lives and say, in our lives, what is the quest that we're on?

Who is the person that we're searching out? Surely, it must be the Lord. Our lives, just as those people who'd lost that person years and years ago, they're striving to find them again, the one that they love, the one that they care for and explain how desperate they were to find them, that they'd loved them all this time but they'd never managed to meet up with them again, they'd never managed to find that relationship and have it restored.

And of course, the Bible tells us that after the fall and after sin came into the world, that men were cut off from God and therefore cut off from Christ even in those days.

[19 : 42] The relationship was severed and unfortunately for us, since you're not born a Christian, even when we're born, that relationship is severed.

We've got a long lost brother because the Bible says that we become joint heirs with Christ in heaven. He's our brother.

We've got a long lost brother, not just long lost, we never knew him in the first place. but we've heard stories about him.

We've heard how good he was, how perfect and how more importantly, even though we've never seen him, he gave his life on a cross that we could not only be saved but have our relationship with God restored.

So, being a Christian, Christian, I have to tell you, is a lifetime's work. You don't become a Christian, that's it. It's a lifetime's work and that work is about finding out more about Jesus as time goes on as much as we can so that when we meet him again, we'll know everything that we can possibly know about him.

[21 : 06] And just like those families, when they're on their search for this person, they're telling everybody that they meet, everything they know about that person in order that if there's any scrap of evidence that they can cling on to that will help them to find that person, that they'll have it.

surely that's telling us that in our lives, on our search, we should be telling other people about this Jesus that we serve and telling them just factually what we've found to witness to what we know in our own lives.

I mean, how many of us, as Kathleen just did, can tell us a story, a real factual story about a miraculous event that happened where Jesus clearly was behind the outcome.

Perhaps we haven't hidden from Boko Haram, but there have been other things in our lives that we can testify that in that situation, Christ, help me, this is what he did.

And you need to know this. So we have a Lord here who is attentive to his people.

[22 : 26] We have a Lord who gets next to his people, he's always next to them. And finally, we have a Lord here who's an advocate for us. This is in verse 22.

The Lord redeems his servants. No one will be condemned who takes refuge in him. We know that through our Saviour's death and resurrection, then no Christian can be condemned.

The world might harm us, might kill us, but they can't be condemned. Romans 8 chapter, sorry, chapter 8 verse 1 says, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

Whatever the penalty, whatever the hardship in this world might be, it's not the eternal punishment that the Bible says is the reward of those who don't serve him.

This, in fact, harks back to the idea of jubilee that's mentioned in the Old Testament. We know that the jubilee occurred every so many years, and that when it was jubilee, then all of the people who were slaves were made free.

[23 : 41] all debts were cancelled, and the person was made free. Let me just read you what Matthew Henry's commentary says, the word jubilee signifies a particularly animated sound of silver trumpets.

This sound was to be made on the evening of the great day of atonement, for the proclamation of gospel liberty and salvation results from the sacrifice of their redeemer.

jubilee. And so slaves will be freed in the year of jubilee. Slaves freed in this way might sometimes request that they stay with their master and remain as slaves.

Perhaps because of great love for their master, perhaps because they felt that they had a good master who cared for them, in which case they had to have their ears pierced through with an awl onto the doorpost of the door.

And from then on, they were slaves forever to that master. Now, when our sins had been forgiven through Christ, through his atoning death, surely our response should be to commit ourselves to him as his servants.

[24 : 57] Why? Because the Bible says that before we become Christians, we're still slaves, but we're slaves to sin. The devil, if you like, has his hold over us in this world.

Sin has its hold over us. And we've been free from the one thing, and in order to be truly free, then we need to be slaves or servants of Christ.

And therefore, what would we do? Well, we don't have our ears pierced, do we? But we do get baptized. We do join a church.

We do take communion. There are symbols by which we say, I'm a believer in Christ. And no doubt, there are other things as well.

And this, as in the case of the slave, is in recognition of what our master, the Lord Jesus, has done for us. And it's an admission that we need him in the future too, all the time.

[26 : 07] We need to constantly be his slave, because then we're safe. We're safe from sin. We're safe from the attacks of this world.

Well, these are three things which this passage talks to us about in terms of the Lord's attributes.

And these three attributes of God should fill us with confidence and comfort, whatever the situation, because they put us firmly in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all things.

And I put it under bullet points, which I've sort of rephrased a little bit, so forgive me. It's done to make a point. Three bullet points. And here they are. And these really take us from what we might think and think we understand, hopefully, to go a bit deeper and think outside our normal mode of thinking.

So the first one is this. God doesn't just hear our prayers, but he's actively listening to them so that he can answer. We've already mentioned that, so that was the easy one.

[27 : 26] I had to work on the other's a bit harder. The second one is this. God doesn't simply respond to our calls for him to come to us, but he's with us continually, all the time.

And the third one, God doesn't wait for us to be judged before paying the penalty for our sin, but he's already done it, once and for all.

It's not as if we're going to go before the judgment seat of God and he's going to proclaim as a sinner and then Christ will say, I'll pay the penalty for that man.

Because Christ has already paid the penalty for everyone who come before that judgment seat. And all he'll say is, this one belongs to me.

Says this in John, sorry, 1st John 2, chapter 1. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence.

[28 : 31] He is the advocate. Jesus Christ, the righteous one, he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. And not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.

Now many people, including myself, quote John 3, 16 and could probably repeat it as being part of their conversion in terms of coming to faith.

But not many people mention or go on to look at the next two verses. So let me just bring your attention to them. You will remember them. After having said, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

And that was the verse that everybody remembers. it goes on to say this. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because he's not believed in the name of God's one and only son.

[29 : 34] it's not the fact that people are saying anything, as it were, negative about Christ, but it says very simply, if we don't believe in the son, if we don't trust in him as our saviour, then we're already condemned.

We don't have to do anything bad, because the Bible says we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It's already been done. And the penalty for sin has already been paid.

But only if we trust in Christ and we can stand before God, the Father, on that day of judgment and say in his name, we've been saved.

It's a comforting thing to know that God, that Christ, that the Holy Spirit aren't inactive, just waiting for things to happen and responding to things in an arbitrary fashion, but rather he's a God who's attentive, he's listening for us all the time, he's listening to our prayers, he's listening even to the innermost thoughts of our heart and our concerns and he's ready to answer even those unspoken prayers.

He's next to us, he's adjacent, he's right by us, ready to put his arm around us, ready to comfort us when we're broken hearted and broken in spirit.

[31 : 16] But most of all, he's a God who is an advocate, he's the one who will stand before God, the Father, and on our behalf, proclaim us righteous, not because of our own righteousness, but because of his robe of righteousness, which he can give us because of his death and resurrection on the cross.

So he's a God who's continually working on our behalf. God's sake, I was talking to a minister the other day on the phone and I can't remember what I said, it was something very trivial, but he said, oh, that's really encouraged me because it's been a really hard week this week.

Actually, it wasn't a minister, it was the minister's wife. I said, well, you know, what's been difficult about the week? He said, well, it started badly and so I pressed a little bit more.

I said, well, what happened? Well, one of the people who is, you know, one of our closest Christian friends, just a member of the church, said to my husband, the minister, what do you do all week?

In other words, you only do it on Sunday. It's an easy life this, isn't it? Just preach on a Sunday and that's it, you've got the rest of the week off. And, you know, don't we as Christians think a little bit like that, even as Christians, about the Lord?

[32 : 43] Well, he's not doing anything at the moment. Why isn't he doing anything? Why isn't he doing anything in Nigeria? Why isn't he doing anything for that person who's ill? Why isn't he dealing with this situation?

But the reality is, God is. He's listening. He's got his arm around people and he's redeeming them from the penalty that is worse than anything they experience on this earth.

Well, I hope you're encouraged by that psalm as I was. Let me just lead you into the last hymn.

I picked this because it's a great hymn. And I know there's not that many of us tonight, but we're going to lift the roof off of this one. If any of what I've been saying has been making any impact, we can sing this hymn in a way which really is an outpouring of joy to the Lord for all he's done for us.

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood? Died he for me who caused his pain, for me who him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

[33 : 58] May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Amen.