

Psalm 34: I Will Teach You the Fear of the Lord

Expository Lessons from the Psalms

I. Introduction to Psalm 34

- a. Why we are doing this psalm now.
 - i. For a long time this has been my favorite psalm. I read it often, meditate on it, and use it a great deal in life and teaching.
 1. It struck me recently that at my age, if there is something I really feel important to teach, I should make sure I don't wait!
 - ii. After finishing a long series on **Acts** (28 lessons), want to do some single lessons or short series before tackling another major book.
 - iii. Peter has many quotes and allusions from the Old Testament throughout **1 Peter**, a very practical letter for Christians. However, his longest quote (which provides the foundation for much of what he teaches in that letter) comes from this psalm.
 - iv. Peter sums up the Christian way of life with two short, memorable statements in **1 Peter**, both of which tie back to this psalm.
 1. "...Love the brotherhood. *Fear God*. Honor the king." (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
 2. "...who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that *we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness*—by whose stripes you were healed." (**1 Peter 2:24**, NKJV)
 - a. Note that fear of God and living for righteousness are both prominent themes in this psalm, which is why Peter includes such a long quote from it in his first letter.
- b. Why I encourage us to use a text based on the Greek Septuagint (LXX) rather than the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) when studying this psalm.
 - i. Peter quotes from this psalm in **1 Peter 3**:
 1. "For 'He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain 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 prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.'" (**1 Peter 3:10–12**, NKJV)

2. Here, Peter is using a direct quote from the LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Jesus, the apostles, and the early Christians generally quoted from.
 - a. Even if you are not able to read Greek, you can see this for yourself by comparing an interlinear Greek LXX with an interlinear Greek New Testament.
3. Actually, the MT and LXX read very similar for this psalm.
 - a. The MT has one additional line that does not appear in the LXX: “The young lions lack and suffer hunger; But those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing.” (**Psalm 34:10**, NKJV)
 - b. Also, in the LXX this psalm is designated **Psalm 33**. Therefore, chapter and verse references are slightly different. I will be reading from the LXX, but if you have a Bible based on the MT it should be easy to follow along.
- c. Background for this psalm.
 - i. It was written by David, at the time he was fleeing from King Saul, right after David had pretended to be a madman (MT) or “changed his appearance” (LXX) before “Abimelech”.
 1. Many people think that the term “Abimelech” is like “Pharaoh” in that it is a title of a foreign ruler (in this case a Philistine king) as opposed to a person’s given name.
 2. Based on that, some have assumed that this ‘Abimelech’ corresponds to Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. The other possibility is that it refers to Abimelech the priest (LXX spelling). Either way, it would refer to the events recorded in **1 Samuel 21-22** (designated **1 Kingdoms 21-22** in the LXX).
 - a. David fled from Saul, received the showbread and Goliath’s sword from the priest at Nob, then went to Achish the king of Gath. There, David pretended to be insane with saliva drooling down his beard, so that the Philistine king would not see him as a threat.
 - b. So this was during a very challenging time for David, when he was being hunted down and needed protection from God!

II. Main Theme of this Psalm: Fear of God (Why and How)

- a. Let us read through this psalm, and notice two key terms that are used more than once: fear of God, and righteous/righteousness.
 - i. **First Question:** Is there any one overarching theme to this psalm?
 - ii. Read **Psalm 34**. (I am reading from a translation based on the LXX text, where it is designated **Psalm 33**.)
- b. Peter clearly picks up on the subject of what it means to be living a righteous life, in **1 Peter 2-3**.
- c. However, I see the discussion about righteousness as being within the overall theme of fearing God. There are three major statements about the fear of God that (I believe) outline the main theme of this psalm.
 - i. First, David (who is especially in need of God's protection at this time of his life) states that God protects those who fear Him.
 1. There is the statement in OSB translation of **Psalm 33:8** (based on the LXX) that "the Angel of the Lord" (which someone could alternately render as "an angel of the Lord") encamps around those who fear God, and rescues them.
 - a. Note that in the original text, there was no distinction between capital letters and small letters. Similar to "sons of God" (which could apply to angels) versus "*the* Son of God" (which would apply to God's only begotten Son, the Word of God). Another example: "spirit" (which could apply to the spirit of a person) versus "Spirit" (in the case where the term would refer to the Holy Spirit).
 - b. Unlike in the English language, there is a definite article ("the") but no indefinite article ("a/an") in Greek.
 - c. So, in the Greek of the LXX, **Psalm 33:8** simply says, "*angel of the Lord shall encamp....*".
 - d. There is no definite article here (which the English translators provide as they think appropriate). Therefore, it seems to me that it is hard to know if this refers to *the* Angel of the Lord (a term which early Christians understood as referring to the Son of God), or to *an* angel of the Lord (which could be any angel).
 - e. For more on how the early Christians understood the term "the Angel of the Lord" as it appears in the Old

Testament, see *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, edited by David Bercot, article on 'Angel of the Lord'.

- f. However, whether this refers to an angel of the Lord or the Angel of the Lord (Christ), the point remains: God provides special spiritual protection and deliverance for the one who fears Him!
- ii. Second, there is a charge/admonition that David gives to all the saints (holy ones of God): "Fear the Lord, you his saints..." in **Psalm 33:10** (LXX).
- iii. Then third, David explains what the fear of God is; what it looks like, in **Psalm 33:12** (LXX) and the verses that follow.
 - 1. It starts with the invitation, "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord." (**Psalm 33:12**, LXX)
 - 2. The verses that follow, which are part of David's instruction of what it means to fear the Lord, is what Peter is quoting from in **1 Peter 3**.
 - 3. I consider this to be the 'How-to-Do-It' part of David's discussion regarding the fear of God, which consists of living a righteous life.

III. Why the Fear of God Is Still Critically Important for Us, Today

- a. David explains to us how to fear God. However, should we consider this something that was relevant in the past (like the sacrificial system and parts of the Law of Moses that were cancelled)?
 - i. When we read this "why and how to fear God" discussion, what should our attitude be?
 - 1. Like walking through a museum containing interesting relics from the past?
 - 2. Or is this instruction as applicable to us today as it was to the people who lived when David was writing?
- b. Years ago I remember hearing a sermon preached in my church where the main point of the message was that now that Christ has come, we no longer need to be afraid of God (unlike the people of the Old Testament). Many have that attitude, to some degree. Is that belief correct? Does it matter?
- c. **Important Questions:**
 - i. Is it *still important* for Christians to fear God?

- ii. Was the fear of God just an Old Testament concept which, now that Christ has come, has been replaced by the love of God as our motivation?
 - iii. Or, if the fear of God is still useful, is it a lesser motivation for Christians (with the love of God being the higher motivation)? When we become mature Christians, is the fear of God no longer necessary?
 - 1. What about the statement in **1 John**: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.” (**1 John 4:18**, NKJV)
 - iv. How would we even begin to answer questions like these?
 - 1. Let us start with Jesus.
 - 2. Then consider what the apostles and other New Testament writers say.
- d. Jesus and the fear of God.
- i. Read **Isaiah 11:1-5**.
 - 1. This is a prophecy that foretells the Holy Spirit would rest upon (and fill) Jesus, the root and offspring of Jesse, at His baptism. This passages tells us much about the nature of the Holy Spirit.
 - 2. One of the seven attributes of the Holy Spirit (seven attributes of the Spirit listed in the LXX, versus six in the MT) is “fear of God”.
 - a. This passage says Jesus would be *filled with the Spirit of the fear of God!*
 - b. **Question:** If this is the *very nature* of the Spirit, if we are filled with the Holy Spirit, doesn’t that imply that we also will be *filled with the fear of God?*
 - c. The passage goes on to explain that a fear-inducing message will proceed from Jesus’ mouth and convict the world. (**Isaiah 11:3-4**)
 - ii. Read **Matthew 10:16-18** and **10:27-28**.
 - 1. Jesus tells the apostles not to be afraid of men, but to *fear His Father!*
 - iii. Read **Mark 9:42-44**.

1. Jesus uses the fear of God (more than the love of God) as motivation to stay away from sin and to not lead others into sin.
- iv. Consider also *which of the two motives (love of God or fear of God) Jesus employs most* in the following examples from His teaching:
1. Sermon on the Mount (especially **Matthew 5 and 7**).
 2. Rich Man and Lazarus story (**Luke 11**)
 3. Instructions to be prepared for His return, in **Matthew 24-25**.
 4. Admonishing the Seven Churches in Asia, in **Revelation 2-3**.
- v. When Jesus describes Himself in **Matthew 12**, he compares Himself to two men from the Old Testament: Jonah and Solomon.
1. He says that He is even wiser than Solomon.
 2. Also, He is an even greater preacher than Jonah.
 - a. “The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.” (**Matthew 12:41**, NKJV)
 - b. Jonah preached the fear of God, and impending destruction to the people of Nineveh: “In a matter of a few days, God will destroy this city”.
 - c. Jonah was such a powerful preacher of the impending judgment of God that an entire city repented of their wickedness and turned back to God. Jesus is saying that He is an *even greater preacher* than that!
- e. Paul also had a lot to say about the fear of God.
- i. “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, *perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*” (**2 Corinthians 7:1**, NKJV)
 - ii. “And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief

they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, *but fear.*" (**Romans 11:17–20**, NKJV)

- iii. "...submitting to one another *in the fear of God.*" (**Ephesians 5:21**, NKJV)
- f. Peter also taught the importance of the fear of God.
 - i. "But in every nation *whoever fears Him* and works righteousness is accepted by Him." (**Acts 10:35**, NKJV)
 - ii. "And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here *in fear....*" (**1 Peter 1:17**, NKJV)
 - iii. "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. *Fear God.* Honor the king." (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
- g. Finally, words from an angel regarding the fear of God.
 - i. "Then a voice came from the throne, saying, 'Praise our God, all you His servants and *those who fear Him*, both small and great!'" (**Revelation 19:5**, NKJV)
- h. **Answers to the Previous Questions:**
 - i. Yes, we still need to fear God. This did not change with the coming of Jesus.
 - ii. If anything, Jesus may have been the greatest preacher of the fear of God of all time (even greater than Jonah).
 - iii. The apostles understood this as well, and after the resurrection of Jesus, continued to preach that we must fear God!
- i. Now that we understand that we need to fear God today, we should pay attention to what it means to fear God, which David now explains in **Psalm 34**.

IV. How to Fear God

- a. Many think of fear as a negative emotional feeling (and love as a positive emotional feeling).
 - i. If so, is God just calling us to have a feeling?
- b. **Question:** Can you love and fear someone at the same time?
 - i. Many struggle with God's love based on experiences with their parents early in life.

- ii. My grandfather could express great anger suddenly and unexpectedly, so it was hard for me to feel secure with him. I was always on guard, afraid that something could set off his temper.
- iii. A counter-example regarding fear is the relationship I have with my own grandson, Noah (the second of three boys), currently age 2. While he is afraid of me (when he is disobedient and needs discipline), he also makes it clear that he is completely secure, relaxed and affectionate. He wants to be with me, and enjoys our time together. He sees me as being consistent, faithful and even predictable (not erratic).
 - 1. Noah has a healthy fear of me, that helps keep him in line. He knows that *if he obeys*, he has nothing to fear!
 - a. He also understands that I am applying discipline, which may be painful, for his own good.
 - 2. It is important for us to see God as He truly is: patient, forgiving and merciful; but *also* disciplining us (and others) fairly and consistently when we are in the wrong (and deserve it).
 - 3. Reading all the Old Testament stories can help to give us a consistent picture of God's nature, His faithfulness as shown over centuries of dealing with all kinds of people under a great variety of situations.
- c. Re-read **Psalm 34:9-19** (designated **Psalm 33:10-20** in the LXX).
 - i. Things we learn about the *God-fearing person*, who lives according to *righteousness*:
 - 1. God protects and delivers him.
 - 2. His needs are taken care of by God.
 - 3. God watches him, and listens to him when he cries out.
 - a. God gives very personal attention to the one who fears Him.
 - 4. While he will face many afflictions, the Lord will deliver him from them all.
 - ii. David explains how to be a God-fearing person.
 - 1. It is much more than just having a feeling.

2. Fear of God should not be a paralyzing fear. Instead, it informs and guides our way of life, much like having genuine faith is a *way of life*, as described in the book of **Hebrews**.
3. David tells us that those who fear God will:
 - a. Deal with sins of the tongue (deceit, speaking evil).
 - i. Note that many times, deceit comes from *people fearing men* more than they fearing God.
 1. [For further development of the topic of 'fear of God' including early Christian understanding of the statement in **1 John 4:18** that "perfect love casts out fear", see notes from 1 Peter expository series: '*Fear God (1 Peter 2:17b)*', January 10, 2021.]
 - ii. What proceeds from your mouth can reveal: Who are you living to please? Who are you trying to impress?
 - b. Shun evil and do good.
 - i. Righteousness is way beyond simply "having a good relationship". Peter uses this passage to explain how we need to live, as Christians.
 - c. Seek peace with others, and pursue it.
 - i. First points in the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 5** (addressing unrighteous anger and the importance of reconciliation).
 - ii. Applications made by Peter in **1 Peter** (living at peace as husbands, wives, servants, etc.)

V. Christians Who Don't Fear God

- a. One of the most disturbing things I have seen in the church, over several decades as a Christian, is encountering 'mature' Christians, even including popular church leaders, who have lost (or perhaps never had) a healthy fear of God.
- b. Lack of fearing God leads to:
 - i. Spiritual arrogance.

- ii. Deceit, thinking that we are so favored by God that we don't need to watch our own personal righteousness.
 - iii. No confessing sins to others. (Many are more concerned about *looking good in the eyes of other people* than being pleasing to God.)
 - iv. Enslaved to sins of the flesh, never able to escape that bondage.
 - v. Overall lack of spiritual humility, unable to learn from others or admit mistakes and sins.
 - vi. Feeling as if you (or your group) can openly ignore clear commandments of God in the Scriptures.
 - 1. Alison's question: "Why are our friends following certain commands of God but completely ignoring others, even when these are brought to their attention?"
 - 2. People believe in God, yet do not "tremble at His word" (**Isaiah 66:5**).
- c. Fear of God can keep us out of all kinds of sin.
- i. **Deuteronomy 5:22-29.**
 - 1. After the Lord descends on Mount Sinai and first speaks the 10 Commandments in the hearing of the Israelites, the people are filled with fear and tell Moses they no longer wish to hear the voice of God. They essentially surrender to the Lord out of fear and tell Moses, "You go up and talk with Him, and tell us what He says. We will do whatever He says!"
 - 2. The Lord, in response, tells Moses: "Would that they had such a heart in them so as to fear Me and guard My commandments all the time, that it might be well with them and their sons forever." (**Deuteronomy 5:29**, LXX, OSB)
 - 3. The Lord knew that the fear of God would keep people from sin, and thereby would be a great blessing for the people. If they would continue to fear Him, it would go well with the people and their descendants, forever!

VI. The Simple Key to Having Effective Prayers

- a. "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and his ears are open to their supplications." (**Psalm 34:15**, designated **Psalm 33:16** in the LXX)

- i. It would be much easier if instead of having to live righteous lives, we could improve the effectiveness of our prayers through other means such as:
 1. Eloquence in prayer, saying the right spiritual-sounding words.
 2. Getting up early.
 3. Praying lengthy prayers, fasting, burning candles, attending the 'right' church, repeating certain words over and over, praying multiple times at certain hours of the day, etc.
- ii. However, God is looking for *those living according to righteousness* who cry out to Him.
 1. Peter makes this application to husbands in **1 Peter 3:7**, then backs that up by quoting from **Psalm 34**.
 - a. "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." (**1 Peter 3:7**, NKJV)
 - b. The very point Peter is making here is that a man who is not understanding toward his wife is not being righteous; therefore, *the Lord will not listen to his prayers*. Peter then goes on to quote from **Psalm 34** (in **1 Peter 3:10-12**), to emphasize that point.
 2. James makes the same point when discussing effective prayer.
 - a. "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent *prayer of a righteous man* avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit." (**James 5:16-18**, NKJV)
 - b. Elijah was a righteous man, which is why the Lord heard and answered his prayers.
 3. From the angel Raphael in the book of **Tobit**:

- a. "Prayer is good with fasting, almsgiving and righteousness. A few prayers with righteousness are better than many with wrongdoing." (**Tobit 12:8**, OSB)
- 4. Similarly, Isaiah describes (and compares) ineffective and effective prayer and fasting.
 - a. Read **Isaiah 58:1-11**.
 - b. *If we are righteous* when praying and fasting, the Lord will answer immediately.
- 5. This is similar to the difference between hacking at something with a dull knife versus cutting effectively with a razor-sharp one.
 - a. Before you pray, give close attention to being righteous!

VII. Some Other Insights from this Psalm

- a. The opening verse: "I will bless the Lord at all times (in all seasons)".
 - i. When things go well, or when we are being refined by trials and tested by God and/or Satan, regardless, we should bless the Lord in all circumstances.
- b. This psalm contains an important prophecy about Jesus.
 - i. "He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken." (**Psalm 34:20**, NKJV)
 - 1. "The Lord shall guard all their bones, not one of them shall be broken." (**Psalm 33:21**, LXX, OSB)
 - 2. Read **John 19:31-37**.
 - a. After Jesus died on the cross, none of His bones were broken That was in contrast with the two thieves crucified alongside Him, whose bones were broken in order to hasten their deaths before the start of the Sabbath.
 - b. This also was foreshadowed by the Passover Lamb account in **Exodus 12**, where the Jews were told not to break any of the bones of the lamb when they ate the Passover lamb.

- ii. Possibly another prophecy in the unusual statement: “Oh, *taste* and see that the LORD is good...” (**Psalm 34:8**, NKJV; **Psalm 33:8** LXX, OSB)
 - 1. **Question:** Is this “tasting” to be understood *figuratively*, or *literally*?
 - a. The word “taste” here is the same word in the LXX that is used when Esau wants to eat the stew prepared by Jacob.
 - 2. I did find one early liturgy (a set of fixed prayers associated with celebrating the Lord’s Supper), known at the *Liturgy of Saint James*, in which this passage was quoted as a reference to the Lord’s supper.
 - a. See *Liturgy of James*, found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, p. 548.
 - i. Note that the date and original form of this early liturgy are uncertain.
 - b. Recall that Jesus said that His followers must eat his flesh in **John 6**. Also, at the Last Supper He said, “Take and eat, this is my body” (**Matthew 26:26**, **Mark 14:22**, **1 Corinthians 11:24**).
- c. It says that the righteous will face many afflictions, but the Lord will deliver them from them all (**Psalm 34:19**, designated **Psalm 33:20** in the LXX).
 - i. [NOTE: This important passage is discussed at length in a separate lesson posted on our teaching website www.walking-by-faith.org, in the Psalms expository series: ‘*Psalm 34:19-20 – Many are the Afflictions of the Righteous*’ September 18, 2022.]
 - ii. Certainly this applied to the Righteous One of **Isaiah 53**, the Suffering Servant.
 - iii. However, it also applies to us.
 - 1. So we should never preach any form of the so-called “prosperity gospel”.
 - 2. Also, do not be surprised when severe challenges come our way!
 - a. That was the case in the life of Jesus and in the lives of the apostles.

VIII. Closing Challenges:

- a. This is a very practical psalm, one that Peter quoted from and applied to great effect.
- b. We still need to fear God. Here, David shows us what that looks like, how to live that way.
- c. God listens to the prayers especially of those who fear him and live according to righteousness. Become a powerful, effective man or woman of prayer, and gain the protection of God, by fearing God and living for righteousness.
 - i. To me, the difference between praying with righteousness and praying without it is similar to the difference between attempting to cut something with a dull knife versus doing the same with a razor-sharp one!
- d. This psalm shows us what it means to lead a righteous life.
- e. **Psalm 34** also includes one more significant prophecy (and maybe two) about Jesus, written 1,000 years before He died on the cross.