

Psalm 34

There is Something More Important than Happiness

1. Background

The title of the Psalm (“Of David, when he changed his behaviour before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away”) refers to the events recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David had just become a fugitive from Saul. He fled first to Nob (where he was given the sword of Goliath) – and then on to Gath, the city of Goliath. Unsurprisingly, the Philistine soldiers recognized him and reported him to Achish, the king. (Abimelech was probably a royal title used by the Philistines, just as the king of Egypt was called Pharaoh. See Genesis 20 and 26.)

David was afraid – he wasn’t safe in Israel, and he wasn’t safe in Philistia. But God provided him with a remarkable deliverance.

2. Structure

The Psalm is an acrostic – each verse begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (although there are two very minor irregularities). The acrostic form is typical of “wisdom” literature – it is designed to help memorization (by those whose mother tongue is Hebrew!).

Despite the acrostic form of the Psalm, it is still possible to discern another structural form. Verses 1-10 and verses 11-22 form two distinct units. Both begin with a purpose statement (i.e. “I will bless the LORD at all times,” v. 1; and “I will teach you the fear of the LORD,” v. 11); and both invite others to join in (i.e. to magnify the LORD with the psalmist, and to learn the fear of the LORD from the psalmist).

<i>What I learned</i> (vv. 1-10)	<i>What I teach</i> (vv. 11-22)
A ¹ (vv. 1-3) <i>I will bless</i> the LORD (so come and praise him with me)	A ² (vv. 11-14) <i>I will teach</i> my “sons” (so come and learn from me)
B ¹ (vv. 4-10) <i>My experience</i> – the poor seek the LORD in trouble and are delivered by him (but the young lions go hungry!)	B ² (vv. 15-22) <i>My observation</i> – the LORD delivers the righteous from all their trouble (but the wicked must bear their punishment!)

The similarity between the two units continues in vv. 4-10 and vv. 15-22, i.e.

- Verses 4-10 are largely the psalmist’s experience, while vv. 15-22 are largely his observation.
- The verbs in vv. 4-10 largely concern what the people of God do (seeking, looking, shining, calling, tasting, seeing, fearing, and not lacking). But the verbs in vv. 15-22 largely concern what the LORD does (hearing, delivering, drawing near, saving, keeping, ransoming).

- Verses 4-10 close with a contrast between the young lions, who go hungry, and those who seek the LORD, and are provisioned. Likewise vv. 15-22 close with a contrast between the wicked, who are slain and bear their guilt, and the servants of the LORD, who are ransomed and do not bear their guilt.

Notice also that the first part of the Psalm climaxes with “the fear of the LORD”, and second part opens with “the fear of the LORD”.

3. An ABC of theology and discipleship

As an acrostic, the Psalm is an A-Z of theology and discipleship.

As an A-Z of theology, the Psalm declares that the LORD is good. This is relational: his ears and eyes are turned towards us; he is near to hear and respond to prayer. His response to prayer means rescue, deliverance, protection and ransom; it brings vindication and makes our faces shine; it promises the good things of life, a long and full life, and the experience of shalom. It also means that evil doers have the opposite experience!

As an A-Z of discipleship, the Psalm assumes that the LORD’s people (the poor and faithful, the righteous and devoted) face many terrors and troubles, heart-break and inner crushing. It therefore urges that they seek help from, look to, revere, rely on, and cry out to the LORD. We are to be honest rather than deceptive in our turning to the LORD.

“The Psalter as a whole emphasizes that weak people often do not experience the LORD this way. The LORD is often strangely far away and inactive.” The Psalter “nevertheless includes Ps. 34 and similar psalms to affirm that it speaks truth that those experiences must not be allowed to overwhelm. And it challenges people in situations like...David’s to live by its theology and spirituality” (John Goldingay).

4. The fear of the LORD

The Psalm draws our attention to (a) the goodness of the LORD, (b) the praise of the LORD, (c) the fear of the LORD, and (d) the human desire for the good life. The Psalm doesn’t deny the legitimacy of desire for happiness – but it’s clear that the desire for happiness must be subordinated to trusting God’s for his goodness, worshipping him for his praiseworthiness, and seeking/serving him for his fear. We have some idea already about God’s goodness and praise. But what is his fear?

“The fear of the LORD is the *beginning* of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10a). That doesn’t mean that you start with the fear of the LORD and then move on to other things. It means rather that the fear of the LORD lays the foundation of wisdom, so that all true wisdom depends on it. And secondly, “All those who *practice* it [the fear of the LORD] have a good understanding” (Ps. 111:10b) – which means that the fear of the LORD is something very practical. It’s about the way we think, and speak and behave. The fear of the LORD is not just an emotion.

Thus, *the fear of the LORD is right living – it is wisdom-in-action.*

We demonstrate the fear of the LORD by seeking him (unlike the self-sufficient “young lions”), vv. 9-10 – and also by serving him (unlike the wicked), vv. 13-14.