

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Psalm 34

As was pointed out in the sermon this week, it is good/helpful to understand the context in which this particular psalm was crafted. I Samuel 21-22 gives us the context (especially 21:10-22:4). David had been anointed King by the prophet Samuel back in chapter 16. But it would be roughly a decade until David was actually enthroned as king. The main reason for the delay was that there was already an enthroned king (Saul) who had no intention of giving up his throne. Saul would pursue David on and off for years. In the meantime, David waited. Waiting is an important theme in the psalms, and really the Bible in general.

The alternative to waiting is taking matters into our own hands...which usually doesn't turn out so well. (The classic example is the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and the resulting Ishmael.) Waiting requires trust...which is another HUGE theme in the Bible. In fact, at least from the human perspective, trust is the MAIN theme of the Bible. One way to look at the Bible is as the story of how humans don't trust their Creator and make a mess of things, and how God woos us back through love. But the choice to trust or not is always before us—individually and collectively. The church, incidentally, is meant to be the people who show the rest of the world how and why to trust God.

So, while we trustingly wait, what are we to do? David gives us an answer (in this psalm, and in most of the psalms), and that is to praise God (see 34:1-3). That may sound a bit cliché, and Sunday School-like, but I think it's deeper than we often give it credit for. Praise is more than just lavishing God with complements. Praise is a way of remembering what God has done; remembering how good God really is. Remembering what God has done in the past builds the foundation for trusting Him in the present. Praising is also a form of preparation as we rehearse the story, as we envision/imagine where our good God is taking us. I suspect that those ten years on the run is what prepared David to be a good King. All that waiting, all that remembering, all that rehearsing had a positive, formative effect on David.

The negative alternative to praising while we wait is fretting while we wait. Throughout the psalms we see the compare/contrast of trust vs. fear. In verses 4-14 we see David give his fear over to God, and he encourages his readers to do the same. The watershed question as to whether we trust God or anxiously live in fear boils down to what do we really think of God. Is He good? Does He have our best interest in mind? The testimony of this psalm, of all the psalms, and of Scripture as a whole is a resounding YES!!!

Psalm 34:8 has been one of our anchor verses for this Summer in the Psalms series. "*Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him.*" To take refuge in God is a poetic way of saying trust and patiently wait upon God. "Taste" and "see" are ways of saying that God's goodness is something that needs to be personally experienced. Let's face it, it's hard to trust someone else's experience. Life, properly understood, is God's invitation to experience His goodness. Or to say it another way, if we're not experiencing God's goodness, we're not experiencing life as it's meant to be...we're not truly living.

Now, we must quickly set expectations here. “Experiencing God’s goodness” does NOT mean we don’t experience challenges, difficulties, distress, trouble, pain, etc. Notice what David said in verse 19, *“The righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.”* We should probably expect trouble. God never promises to shield us from such things, but to be with us through such things. But in case we’re tempted to think or question *“Why would a good God allow us to experience pain?”*, we need to remember that God became one of us and experienced pain first hand on our behalf.

Notice verses 12-14. David gives exhortations on how to live/behave rightly. But let’s keep this in perspective. He was NOT saying: follow these steps, obey these “rules”, and life will go well for you and you won’t have any troubles. He was, rather, simply saying that there is a righteous way to live, and an unrighteous way to live. The righteous experience God’s closeness...which is its own reward.

A theme in this psalm is God’s deliverance. But note, we don’t need deliverance unless we’re in hot water to begin with. God delivers us from trouble...which is different than not allowing us to face trouble. We could say that “trouble” has formative potential because through it we either turn toward God or away from God.

One of the dangers for us who live in such an affluent society is that it’s easy (or easier) for us to shield ourselves from trouble, and to become self-reliant in the process. We are never more at danger than when we’re trusting ourselves instead of trusting God. At the same time, we’re never as full of fear and anxiety than when we’re trusting ourselves rather than trusting God...but we try nonetheless. One of the ways this plays out is that we avoid pain...not only personal pain, but also by avoiding the pain of others. Pain is a reminder that things can go sideways quickly, and we don’t like to be reminded of that. Unfortunately, in our society, many of us have the “luxury” (or is it a curse?) to stick our heads in the sand and ignore the pain of our neighbors near and far. We might see the headlines of tragedy all over the world, but we distract ourselves into inaction. So, perhaps, one of the reasons God allows us to experience troubles of various kinds is His way of forming compassion in us. He is compassionate, and He wants us to be compassionate too. But it’s hard to be compassionate without experiencing some pain of our own.

One of the impressive things about David is that he didn’t wallow in self-pity for all the trouble he endured. Instead, he turned his heart/attention to God...but also turned the attention of those around him to God as well (see verse 11). Practically, a good way to deal with troubles is to take our eyes off ourselves and focus on others (be that God or other people). When our focus is on ourselves our problems are magnified. When our eyes are on others, perspective is brought to our life and problems. Something to keep an eye on is how much time we spend praying for things regarding ourselves versus how much time I spend praying for others. (Journaling can be a good way to quantify that.)

Q. Are you in a season of “waiting”? What are you waiting for?

- Q. Is there anything you're presently fearing or fretting about that you'd like to share?
- Q. Practically speaking, what does trust in God look like in your life? (We're talking beyond eternal destination...we're talking right here, right now...how does trust in God play out tangibly?)
- Q. What do you fear? (List all the fears, anxieties, worries you have/experience.) How can you give those over to God? How can your church family help you give those over to God?
- Q. Give testimony to God's goodness in your life. How have you experienced God's goodness in your life? Be as specific and detailed as possible.
- Q. How, or in what ways, do you seek to be self-reliant/self-protective?
- Q. How has personal pain, trouble, difficulties made you a more compassionate person?
- Q. How has your personal challenges, pain, troubles, turned your attention to God? How have you used it to turn other people's attention to God? (Or how can you use it to turn people's attention to God?)
- Q. It's quite natural to seek relief from pain, trouble, discomfort, etc. David's example is to go to God when in pain, distress...to seek God as his refuge. What are you tempted to seek refuge in other than God?
- Q. How have you experienced God as your refuge? (Be as specific, detailed, as possible.)
- Q. When you've experienced pain/trouble in the past, what can you look back on today and see God inviting you into at the time? Or, perhaps you're experiencing trouble now/presently...what may God be inviting you into? (What might He be wanting to grow in you?)
- Q. David is a good example of someone who didn't bear his pain alone. He allowed other people into his life and allowed them to bear his burden with him. Do you allow others into your struggles, or do you tend to isolate yourself? How's that working out for you? (Or, from the other perspective, how willing are you to enter into other people's pain and bear their burden with them?)
- Q. Bearing one another's burdens is something Christians are called to do. (see Galatians 6:2). How are we, or how can we, make this a communal practice?