

“Ready to Praise”

August 12, 2018

Psalms for the Soul series

SHOW PSALM 34 video

I want to tell you how much this version of Psalm 34 means to me. I’ve read it before - many times - but to have the psalm spoken by people in our congregation and community is powerful. To hear Edna Gilbert, who will celebrate her 100th birthday this October, say, “I bless God every chance I get; my lungs expand with his praise” is a true statement. Her life and witness gives God glory! For every person who read a verse, there’s even more meaning because I know them and some of their story.

We started looking at Psalms last week - perhaps some lesser-known psalms. Maybe you’ve heard bits and pieces of Psalm 34 before; it’s a psalm of thanksgiving, and it begins with a call to praise. For me, Edna offering that call to praise is powerful. She has lived through joy and struggle, triumph and tragedy. Think of how much she’s experienced - she’s been around since 1918! Her voice calling me to thank God - to bless God - is deeply faithful and real.

And these first words call us to consider our experience of God. How many of us start our prayers with thanksgiving? If I’m honest, that’s not always how it goes for me. I’m pretty good at coming to God with my list of needs and wants and bypassing the opportunity to praise God and thank God for being faithful and offering me grace every day.

Psalms were used in worship; they were usually sung. There’s some real meat to it if we dig deeply enough. If you look in your Bible, you’ll notice that Psalm 34 has a title – a note before the verses begin that gives us some context. It’s attributed to King David at a particularly interesting time in his life - after a time of crisis and difficulty.

It’s recounted in I Samuel 21 - supposedly when David encountered the king of Gath, which was a Philistine territory. David had been driven out of his kingdom by King Saul, who wanted him dead. He fled in fear for his life to what he thought would be a safe place to go. But when David fled to Gath, some of the Philistines recognized him and remembered how he had defeated them so many times before.

The people knew who he was and what a mighty king he was, so you can imagine that they felt threatened. So, David was caught – fleeing from one dangerous situation and winding up in another! David’s solution was to act in such a way that made the king believe that he was not well – and therefore not so dangerous. It worked, and the king ordered him to leave.

Remember that the Psalms are for worship, and certainly David had reason to praise God after he was delivered from what could have been tragic situation - even death! Psalm 34 would’ve been sung in the Temple, and it’s easy to see how people

could connect to it. Perhaps they didn't have the intensity of David's experience, but the message is powerful because it reminds us of God's love and care for us even in the hardest times.

Maybe you've never been on the run as David was, but we've all been in difficult situations. We've experienced crises and struggles when we've felt scared and even hopeless - and maybe we're facing them now. Whether it's a health scare, relationship struggles, spiritual battles, seeking forgiveness, dealing with past scars, or anything else, maybe we can relate.

This is a song of thanksgiving that offers wisdom to those who learn it. It's also a song praising God for deliverance! It's a call to remember God's faithfulness and claim it now. God listens, hears, and cares about us. We are not alone; God is with us. God is a refuge. God will not abandon us.

In ancient Israel, thanksgiving psalms were used to teach. If you read Hebrew, you'd notice that the psalm is an acrostic, meaning that the first word of each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This psalm could be easily taught and hopefully learned as well. It was the hope that people would learn how to live thankfully. The psalm encourages us to be ready to praise.

The Message version of this psalm says, "I will bless the Lord at all times." Usually, to bless meant to kneel before someone, usually a king. For some of us, kneeling before God might be comfortable. Others of us might want to bow in prayer. Still others might want to raise their hands and shout for joy. Whatever way we give God glory is fine. For those who were at Unity this week, we witnessed thousands of people praising God in different ways, and the Holy Spirit's presence was clear!

But the psalm encourages us to consider what it means that praising God - thanking God - is really a lifestyle. Psalm 34 tells one person's story, but then anyone who hears is invited to listen and trust in God. We hear that God is faithful - that God heard me when I was in trouble and came to help. And then there's that wonderful line: "O, taste and see that the Lord is good." We've heard this person's take on God's care, and now we have the opportunity for that same relationship!

Friends, it's no small risk to take, but it's something we have to do ourselves. No one can do it for us, and we can't do it for anyone else. We can trust God and see where life goes! We can make a commitment to be God-centered. That's what we witnessed today in baptism - Serena standing before God and all of us. We celebrate God's grace in her life, and we thank God for her decision to be baptized and continue her journey with God.

Last week, when we looked at Psalm 1, we heard the image of the tree planted by the water - the righteous are connected to God. Psalm 34 repeats that. Here the psalmist is saying that fearing God - being dependent on God, being God-centered - makes for a happy life. But there's one crucial point: the righteous are not immune to

suffering, and a blessed life isn't without difficulty. The promise is that God will with us in our suffering.

We can't wait for the "good times" to praise God. Praising God isn't dependent upon what's happening, and that's a challenge to hear. Suffering is real, and it's not easy to reconcile our own suffering or anyone else's suffering with the promise of God's deliverance.

The call is to trust that God is with us - no matter what - and to reach out to others in the midst of suffering. We can praise God every chance we get, and we don't have to be thankful *for* what happens. There's a verse in I Thessalonians that's often misquoted. It says, "Give thanks **IN** all circumstances" - not "Give thanks **FOR** all circumstances." There's a difference, and I've seen it lived out in people like Edna who aren't thankful for the struggle, but who are very clear that God is with them in the struggle!

To be ready to praise may not necessarily be something visible. It's more a way of life - always blessing God because of how faithful and steadfast God is! It's starting with thanksgiving and remembering God's goodness, grace, and care in our lives.

Being ready to praise calls us to give glory to God for the blessings in life - not to ourselves. We have to be humble enough to praise God at all times. When we go through the hard stuff of life like illness, divorce, unemployment, addiction, abuse, death of someone we love, or whatever else you bring here today, we can rely on and trust in God's help.

And when we find ourselves on the other side of the struggle, we can praise God for sticking with us through it. Friends, those are powerful moments to witness to others about God's loving care. We can offer our own psalm of thanksgiving - maybe even making our own psalm of praise like we did earlier with the kids. It's an opportunity to share with others how faithful God is, and we can give that invitation to others to trust in God! We can testify about what God has done in our lives!

Praise isn't just when we have our hands in the air or when the words "Thank you, Jesus!" come out of our mouths. It was powerful to gather with thousands of people and sing songs of faith at Unity, and I hope that spirit of thanksgiving continues in every person who was there. But it's really a lifestyle - to praise God, to thank God, to give God glory, to proclaim that God is faithful and that grace has led us through. That's living out the promise of this psalm.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE