

## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: the wisdom of God*

*Pray for God's wisdom in whatever area of your life you feel it is needed the most. Be specific.*

### For myself

*Ask the Lord's blessings on your travel, on your journeys and your getting about from place to place by whatever means. Pray for safety and for the blessing of success in your endeavours.*

### For others

**Jesus, You knew what real life was like and You knew what it meant to deal with other people who did not necessarily agree with you. Come by Your Holy Spirit to grant us wisdom and patience as we deal with others, Lord, for we do not always understand why people react to us as they do. Give us the grace to get alongside other people and see things from their perspective, so that when we speak of You and Your Love, we may communicate the Gospel with integrity and purpose. AMEN**

## Meditation

This is Your work O Lord our God,  
to give enduring love and purpose  
to a world that has lost its way;  
to shine Your light in the darkest of places  
so that all the people might see;  
to challenge all evil wherever it is found  
and confront it with love and truth;  
to overcome troubles, trials and distress  
with the beauty of harmony and peace;  
to offer healing and perfect wholeness  
to all who are ravaged by illness;  
to bind up what has been broken apart  
and give real hope to the despairing;  
to give back hope and confidence

to those who struggle with life;  
to mend the broken in soul and spirit  
with the love of a Saviour who cares.  
Continue to do Your work, O Lord, forever.

## Bible Passage

### ***Psalm 34:1-10***

*Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who forced him to leave, and he went.*

- <sup>1</sup> I will bless the LORD at all times;  
His praise will always be on my lips.
- <sup>2</sup> My soul will boast in the LORD;  
let the humble hear and rejoice.
- <sup>3</sup> Glorify the LORD with me:  
let us lift up His name together.
- <sup>4</sup> I sought the LORD, and He answered me;  
He delivered me from all my fears.
- <sup>5</sup> Look to Him, and be radiant;  
and your faces will never be covered with shame.
- <sup>6</sup> This humble soul called, and the LORD heard him;  
He saved him out of all his troubles.
- <sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD encamps  
around those who fear Him, and he delivers them.
- <sup>8</sup> Taste and see that the LORD is good;  
Happy are those who take refuge in Him.
- <sup>9</sup> Fear the LORD, you His saints,  
for those who fear Him lack nothing.
- <sup>10</sup> The lions may grow weak and hungry,  
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

## Review

Some Psalms stand out from others because certain words or phrases reach out and take hold of us. Psalm 34 does this, for it is a stunning poem of praise which offers praise to God through a combination of personal testimony and general encouragement. For example, in the first stanza (34:1-3), verses 1 and 2 are a personal invitation to praise God, and this is followed in verse 3 by encouragement to join in; *'glorify the Lord with me ...'* (34:3). The psalm then continues with a mixture of personal thanksgiving (verses 4,6,8) and encouragement (verses 5,7,9,10). All in all, it is a very positive psalm!

When we think about what praise means, it is often divided this into 'praise for who God is' and 'praise for what God has done'. The two are never entirely separate, but there is plenty of praise here for what God has done, for example, *'He delivered me from all my*

*fears*' (34:4). The psalm also offers praise for who God is, as in this famous phrase; *'taste and see that the Lord is good'* (34:8), which draws our attention to His 'goodness'.

One major feature of the psalm is this; it connects strongly with many other scriptures. For example, verse 7 speaks of the Lord 'encamping' around His people, which reminds us of Elisha when he was surrounded by an army, but prayed for his servant to see the angelic host protecting God's people despite the threat of the enemy (2 Kings 6:15f.). In the New Testament, Peter famously quotes *'taste and see that the Lord is good'* (1 Peter 2:3) in his appeal to his readers to taste the pure spiritual milk of the Gospel.

There are many other well known and powerful phrases in this psalm: *'I sought the Lord, and He answered me'* (34:4); *'let us lift up His name together'* (34:3); *'the angel of the Lord encamps around those that fear Him'* (34:7); *'Fear the Lord, you His saints'* (34:9). These and other phrases from Psalm 34 crop up in hymns and church liturgies the world over, and have featured strongly in the spiritual lives of many significant Christian leaders and missionaries. But the overall impression of this part of the psalm is of someone in full flow of praise to God, encouraging others to do the same; *'I sought the Lord, and He answered me ... taste and see that the Lord is good'* (34:4,8). It is an irresistible psalm!

## Going Deeper

In order to gain the most from this psalm, we will study some of the words that are used within it. This will focus our attention on a number of fascinating issues, and will hopefully lead us to new things within the Lord's revelation of His Word, here in this psalm.

### ***The puzzle of the superscription of the psalm***

The superscription of the Psalm indicates that the praise it describes has its roots in David's escape from the hands of a king Abimelech *'when he pretended to be insane'*. We can trace this incident to 1 Samuel; 21:13ff, but 1 Samuel mentions a King Achish, not a King Abimelech! This is something of a mystery! The name Abimelech appears in Genesis as the name of a series of Philistine Kings who had a more or less friendly relationship with Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 26), but no-one of that name ever met David! However, 'Abimelech' may have been a generic name for a Philistine King, but we cannot be sure of this (like the name 'Windsor' for the English royal family). Despite all this mystery, there is no doubt that David did indeed feign madness to get away from Saul and take refuge in Philistine (1 Samuel 21), but the details beyond that are not clear.

On this occasion, David experienced the mercy of God as he escaped the clutches both of Saul and the Philistines. For the believer, such experiences of deliverance have always been the cause of praise and celebration.

### ***Bless (34:1)***

In verse 1, *'I will bless the Lord'* is sometimes translated *'I will extol the Lord'* (NIV). Normally we think of God as blessing of us rather than the of us blessing God. However, the word *'to bless'* is complicated in Hebrew, but it is best understood as *'to be positive and show favour towards someone'*. God's blessing of us is shown in His active favour towards us, which is the salvation He gives us through Jesus Christ, and the hope we have in Him of eternal life. However, we can also bless God by offering Him the honour and worship that is His due and which also reflects our love.

### ***Boast (34:2)***

Verse 2 uses the expression *'my soul will boast in the Lord'*. We naturally shy away from the

idea of boasting because it appears to place the emphasis on self. In 2 Corinthians, Paul has the problem of trying to explain to the Corinthian church that his own '*boasting*' in the Lord should not be thought of as revealing something of his own (Paul's) heart and character. He '*boasts*' in Christ in order to give glory to God. As he comes to the end of the letter in chapter 12 he talks of the greatness of experiencing Christ and asks why anyone who has genuinely experienced the love of God should shy away from '*boasting in the Lord*'.

In common English, boasting is regarded as a reprehensible form of behaviour if all it does is to make false claims. But if what is boasted of is fundamentally true, moreover the truth about God, then this is a different matter. There is no reason why a Christian should not boast in the greatness of God, especially in our world with all its sham and dubious status.

### ***Glorify (3)***

Nearly all other translations of the Bible begin verse 3 with the common phrase '*O magnify the Lord ...*' The word used in Hebrew ('gadole') simply comes from a word meaning '*to make great*', and its other use, as I have translated it here, is the word '*glorify*'. When we talk of '*glorifying*' the Lord, is it possible for us to make God any greater than He already is? Surely not, but we can make His greatness known, and this is what to '*glorify*' God means; we honour Him and who He is by making His glory known in the world by our worship, but talking about Him and doing His will.

There are millions of people who do not know of the God who made the world and saved us in Jesus Christ. To them, Christianity is just another religious system, and it is just this, I am afraid, to many who come to our churches. So, to '*glorify*' the Lord means making the truth of God and His Gospel known to all people.

### ***Fear (34:4)***

The word '*fear*' which appears at the end of verse 4 is used in two different ways in Psalm 34. In this verse what is '*feared*' is danger or trouble for body and soul. We are all genuinely afraid of things that destroy what is good and right, and this what the word means here in verse 4. It is right and proper for us to bring such fears to God so that He can deliver us from trouble.

The word '*fear*' is also used in a different way in the Bible, and in this psalm as well. An example of this is to be found in the well known expression '*the fear of the Lord*'; sometimes translated '*the awe of the Lord*'. There is a different word in Hebrew for positive fear or '*awe*', and this conveys a proper sense of wonder at the majesty of God, certainly not negative or cringing '*fear*'. Verse 7 conveys this when it says, '*the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him*', and in verse 9 '*Fear the Lord, you His saints.*'

### ***Radiant (34:5)***

In verse 5 it says '*look to Him and be radiant*'. When Moses came down from the mountain (Exodus 34:29) his face glowed with the presence and power of God, so much so that the people were afraid. This also happened to Jesus at His Transfiguration (Matt 17:1f.), and both scriptures lie behind Paul's famous description of the transformation of the soul before the presence of God; '*all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*' (2 Cor. 3:18). Some regard this as mere boasting on Paul's part, but it is a genuine result of faith.

In physics, the principle of radiance is that 'a body gives out a proportion of the radiation that it has received'. Surely our aim is to give out what we have received, that is, the glory of God, and not just absorb it? We radiate the glory of God as we praise Him, and Psalm 34 says we radiate God when we '*look to him*' and are '*without shame*'.

### ***Taste and See (34:8)***

These wonderful words from Psalm 34 are found in many other scriptures (see John 20:29, Hebrews 6:5, 1 Peter 2:3). They are used in several places as an invitation to God's people to do more than just believe in the love of God, but to put this to the test and find it true. The phrase '*taste and see*' asks us to stop merely thinking about God and start trusting Him; to stop standing back and take a step of faith. It is remarkable that many people have a picture of God that is very negative, and have trouble even with the idea that God is 'good'. Yet the very thing which seems so impossible for some to believe is really the key to truth and life. When we take a step of faith and trust in God's love, we will quickly find ourselves praising God instead of finding everything about Him a mystery!

### ***The lions (34:10)***

The lions in verse 10 are translated '*young lions*' in some other versions of the Bible. The reference is to lions old enough to hunt, but not old enough to have to defend their place in the pride, they have to depend upon their own abilities to survive. Hence, in ancient times they were an image of self sufficiency. Lions have always been regarded as the 'kings' of wildlife, able to feed and look after themselves through strength, cunning and speed; how much more capable are the young lions, in the prime of health. Yet Psalm 34 talks of those who depend upon the Lord as spiritually sustained and supported even more than these supreme natural examples of self-sufficiency.

The Christian claims that by faith in the Lord, God's people are completely sustained, '*those who seek the Lord lack no good thing*'. So if God is good, and we lack no 'good' thing, then we are entitled to believe that whatever happens to us in this life can be endured and overcome through the strength of our God who loves us. Our life and death are in his hands for good and not for evil, and we therefore praise Him.

## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***Encouragement***

A psalm such as this will help any of us at a number of different levels. Firstly, It can be an encouragement when we are feeling spiritually down, by reminding us of the faith that we have and the many benefits of our salvation. It is a sad fact of our human condition that we easily forget things and need to be reminded of what is important to us and of value. I have come across many people who tell me that they used to have a vibrant faith, and as time has gone by and difficult things have happened, trials have dampened the zeal that they once had for the Lord. How terrible this is! We all need the sustenance of God's Word to help us through life, and the sad fact is that many people do not know the Psalms and do not know where to turn to find this kind of spiritual sustenance. If we have never learned psalms such as these or formed the personal habits of reading them, then we will not be able to receive the Lord's strength through them when we need them.

#### ***Memorising poems and psalms, and singing them***

The other way to use a psalm such as this is to memorise it, or put it into song. The Psalm was written originally in rhythmic Hebrew poetry, but this poetry has largely disappeared in our translations. If we get to know the psalm, then we should feel free to express what it says in different ways, perhaps reforming the words into a rhythmic pattern that fits our own styles of language and indeed music. A good example of this is the modern sung version of the 'The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want ...', which is a versified version of the psalm which goes very well with the music.

Surely we can do more with the psalms today, and work on the possibilities of versification and translation. We do not have to be Biblical scholars to do this! It would be quite easy, for example, to take parts of the first three verses of this psalms to make a refrain, and use parts of the other verses to make the basis of a song with a chorus, for example. If we do not pretend that the end result is the same as Scripture, then we end up with a hymn or song rooted in God's Word. This psalm has many uses!

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- It would take someone several days to memorise portions of a psalm such as this, but the exercise is always worth it. You may feel that this is too difficult, but it can be done simply by repeating the psalm and perhaps writing it out slowly, and then spending some time examining its details.
- Try making some poetry out of the words of the psalm and do you best to bring out its meaning and not miss what you believe to be important.

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Is it really possible to give praise to the Lord 'at all times'? Is Psalm 34 too optimistic for you? In what way?
2. Which of the words or phrases of this Psalm are most important to you and most easily give you cause for praise?
3. Which of the words or phrases of this Psalm are most difficult for you to accept and use for praise?

## **Final Prayer**

Bring praise to my heart, Lord God, when I am tired and feel afraid. Turn my fears around so that I might have joy in Your presence again, and rediscover the confidence of my faith. Heal my soul to give me peace as I offer this praise to You. Thank You Lord. AMEN

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