

## **Prayers**

### **To God**

*Weekly theme: the wisdom of God*

**Come, Holy Spirit, and excite us by Your presence. You are God and You are life within us and life around us. We cannot breathe except by Your breath, we cannot move except by Your strength, we cannot love except by Your compassion, we cannot think except by Your wisdom. Come, Holy Spirit, reveal the power of the Almighty and the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and renew us this day.  
AMEN**

### **For myself**

*Pray about your personal relationships and any causing your concern. Do you need to forgive someone for what you feel they have done to you?*

### **For others**

*Pray today for the people of the Catholic church after the electing of Pope Francis. You may or may not agree with the doctrines and provisions of the Catholic church, but please pray for all those for whom this man is now their leader under God.*

## **Meditation**

What is the truth behind Your love, O Lord?  
A love which made the world, chose a people,  
And led a broken nation through the desert;  
A love which spoke through kings and prophets,  
Then wept and bled when all seemed lost through sin.

But in a love of pure and unsurpassed beauty,  
What was lost was found again to our salvation!  
Christ, God's Son, has come to love and save the lost!  
A man who took upon Himself the world's rejection  
And bore it all the way to ugly death;  
The Cross, our brutal crucifying shame.  
All this was done that good might conquer death  
And claim love's glorious victory,  
And prove to all the world the timeless moral truth,  
The best and only hope is always in a risen Saviour!

Friend! This love will only find a home in you and me,  
Those for whom the past and present make us ever lost ...  
For as we place our future's hope in Him  
Then He who longs, in love, to be at home in us  
Will grasp our faith and hold us closer to our destiny.

## Bible Passage

### **Psalm 34:11-22**

- <sup>11</sup> Come, my children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the LORD
- <sup>12</sup> Whoever of you loves life  
and wants to have a long and good life,
- <sup>13</sup> keep your tongue from evil  
and your lips from telling lies.
- <sup>14</sup> Turn away from evil and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.
- <sup>15</sup> The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous  
and His ears are attuned to their cry;
- <sup>16</sup> the face of the LORD is against evildoers,  
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.
- <sup>17</sup> When the righteous cry out, the LORD hears them;  
and He rescues them from all their troubles.
- <sup>18</sup> The LORD is close to the broken-hearted  
and saves the crushed in spirit.
- <sup>19</sup> A righteous person may have many troubles,  
but the LORD rescues him from them all;
- <sup>20</sup> He protects all his bones,  
not one of them will be broken.
- <sup>21</sup> Evil brings death to the wicked;  
the enemies of the righteous will be condemned.
- <sup>22</sup> The LORD redeems the life of His servants;  
no-one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.

## Review

Psalm 34 is a wonderful psalm of worship and praise. The spiritual journey of praise in the first half of the psalm can be summarised in these quotes '*I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise will always be on my lips.*' (34:1): '*Taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in Him.*' (34:8): and this theme of praise is expanded with other words of encouragement. Today's reading, which is the second half of the psalm, follows on by offering words of wisdom to those who worship the Lord, '*come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord*' (34:11) and our passage is filled with all manner of advice for those who worship the Lord.

One astonishing feature of this psalm is that all its words are clear and straightforward. This is something of a rarity in the Old Testament, which is riddled with ancient words and phrases which are genuinely hard to understand (which is why all good translations have notes at the

bottom of each Old Testament page saying things like 'Hebrew unknown' or 'translation uncertain'). But you will not find footnotes like this for Psalm 34, however!

This all suggests that Psalm 34 was well known, but more than this, it was perhaps worded simply so it could be used for teaching children. Children are mentioned in verse 11, but on first reading you might think that this refers to 'God's children', meaning you and me. However, the psalm probably was written for children, and they would have had to learn this text by heart. The psalm's theme are the praise of God, and a moral message about the responsibility of people to do what God requires (e.g. See verses 19,20).

This does not mean, however, that we should not feel able to use this psalm, for it teaches us as much as it has ever taught children in the past! The moral teaching it offers is plain; the God we worship asks us to do what is right, to not lie and to seek peace (34:11-14), for example. The following verses then address the very real concerns of a spiritual person. God's people need to know that He is concerned for us and loves us and will help us at times of trouble (34:15-18). Also, because this world is full of trouble and distress, we need to know that the Lord has the victory over evil and will protect and save those who are His 'righteous' (34:19-22).

Of course, this is not the complete Gospel, but its moral teaching remains profoundly godly, and an important part of what it means to be a New testament 'child of God'.

## Going Deeper

The moral teaching in Psalm 34 is not simply detached from the praise and worship with which the psalm began. The two are interdependent; for if you love the Lord, then you will seek to live by His ways, and if you find the Lord's promises to be true, then you will praise Him. The rest of our study will look at the way in which these statements of faith work in the life of one who believes in God.

### ***The Praises of God's children, in the real world***

Our passage today begins with a call for children to '*listen to me*' (34:11). We can imagine a teacher calling a class of children to order so that a lesson might start. In ancient times, the curriculum that was taught to children was basically the moral wisdom of the community in which they lived, for the children were expected to grow up as members of that community, and accept its standards and way of life without question. We might regard this as repressive today, but in those times it was essential for the survival of the tribal groups within which people lived. In the case of the people of Israel of course, we are talking about the moral standards and norms of God's people, not just any tribal group with their beliefs and practices; this was God's morality which was intended to be shown to the whole world by His people.

### ***Wisdom and righteousness***

Verses 12 to 14 are a brief summary of how to live a righteous life. What was written was typical of what the Old Testament calls 'wisdom' literature. The words are brief and memorable, and each half of every verse balances the other and asks us to compare and contrast what is said in order to find truth. For example, in verse 13 'keep your tongue from evil' is given as plain advice for righteous living, but in the second half of the verse it is explained further; 'and your lips from speaking lies'. Now, all of us would say we agree that it is right to 'keep our tongues from evil', but the second half of the verse stops us in our tracks, because we also know that the temptation to lie is a constant battle for each of us. Scripture therefore gives us a firm challenge which we all know to be good advice, but hard to keep.

## **Seeking peace**

The challenge to live a righteous life is extended in verse 14; *'turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it'*. Again this is clearly right, though tough advice, for we all know that the path of seeking peace, for example, is one that has defeated almost everyone who has sought to follow it. It is at this point we must remember, in the same way that children were undoubtedly taught, that this is God's moral law, not something we can play about with because we are unsure about whether it is possible or not. The only way in which such a moral law can be upheld is in the strength of the God who gave it; as it says in the first half of the psalm *'look to Him and be radiant'*. This is a reminder that we find our strength to do what is right through the God who is the source of all our radiance and energy.

As Christians, we seek to praise God, and the world judges us according to the lives we lead. It is a tough way to live in a world which is super-critical of everyone and everything, but unless we openly do everything we can to live a life that is consistent with the God we praise, then the world has every right to condemn us for hypocrisy; as it frequently does. Our response to these problems should not be to retreat from our beliefs, but to fall back on the source of our strength and our Salvation.

## **Praise God for Truth.**

The following verses of Psalm 34 are profoundly direct. God's people are promised the Lord's attention (34:15) whereas His energies are firmly directed against those who do evil (34:16); the Lord has promised to rescue His people from trouble (34:17) and show them compassion as well (34:18), and similar themes dominate the psalm all the way to the end. Some people find these verses difficult for they say that this shows favouritism on the part of God towards His people. But what is wrong with that if it happens to be true?

Although it does not appear to be an important item on the school curriculum today, 'right and wrong' was certainly at the heart of what was taught to children amongst the people of Israel. Now, in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God has shown Himself openly to be a God of love who calls on all people to reject evil and accept His ways and His kingdom. Those who choose not to and those who choose to do evil have clearly cut themselves off from God, and should hardly be bothered about His condemnation, which is entirely and logically just, for He is the God of all and the Creator of the world. As it says in verse 21; *'evil brings death to the wicked'*. This text sounds rather ruthless, but it is interesting that it is not God who brings trouble and death on those who are evil, but it is evil itself which does this. The Christian faith has never taught that God wants people who reject Him to be killed (as other religions do, and as some teachings of the Muslim religion do). God would rather that people repent and accept Him. Christians should not be afraid of this message.

## **Love and compassion**

However, the emphasis of this Psalm is on those verses which speak of the extraordinary care and love that God pours out upon His people who praise Him, and like the children of Old Testament times, are willing to learn of Him. The promises that God gives to us in these verses are extraordinary and powerful, and they focus on God's deliverance of His people from trouble and distress, even mental anguish (34:18) Yet some people object to them on the grounds that they have not known such blessings, and ask 'where is the evidence in history that God acts like this?' If you talk to ordinary Christians, you will find that the whole history of God's people is one of fulfilment of these promises, but not the formal history of the church, written by academics and writers with other things on their minds than the praises of God. If this history is written at all it is found in the pages of the popular Christian biographies found occasionally in Christian bookshops, but generally not found in libraries, or made available for study.

The Psalms are part of our great heritage of literature making up 'God's Word', and their truth leads us time and again to praising God for what may seem, on the surface, to be extraordinary claims. Yet they reflect the truth of people's experience. '*Taste and see that the Lord is good*' (34:8)

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***A relationship with God***

I do find it amazing that many of our churches are filled with people who, by their own testimony, struggle with the idea of a personal relationship with God through their Saviour Jesus Christ, and therefore do not experience what is talked about in this psalm. While I would never wish to question anybody's right to come to church or desire to be a part the life of God's people, surely we must renew our efforts to help all God's people grasp the truths of the faith as handed on to us. The church bears the historic faith of God's people and always directs people towards their Lord and their God and a relationship with Him.

#### ***The priority of praise***

The Church must not step back from proclaiming its ground for praising God, however. Praise comes from the experience of being 'saved' by the Lord just as Psalm 34 describes (34:22). The Bible has a vast array of stories which describe the same and build on our understanding of this, at least in the New Testament. Here in the second half of Psalm 34, the language is of deliverance from troubles (v17,19), and of taking refuge in Him (v22); but the principle is the same, and all these acts of God are the cause of our praises of Him. Put another way, if you have not known God doing something in your life to help you, you are unlikely to 'praise' Him; but if you know the teaching of the Lord and know from experience that He hear us when we cry out to Him and truly does help in times of trouble, then we will surely praise Him.

#### ***Teaching what is right and wrong***

The Psalms and the Bible as a whole also speak of the experience of feeling distant from the Lord (e.g. Psalms 10, 13) not through lack of faith, but in the midst of faith. It also addresses elsewhere the problems of what happens to us when we feel that prayers and requests for help go unanswered. This psalm does not address these issues, and we should not expect each passage of Scripture to teach us all truth. Psalm 34 is both a psalm of pure praise and a teaching psalm about what is right and wrong, together with a description of the wonderful eternal consequences of standing with the Lord. We should value it for what it is.

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

- There are a number of issues you could pick up from this passage of Scripture, the straightforward moral teaching offered, and its value as a standard; or the problem of God's apparent rejection of those who do evil (34:16). What the psalm should do, however, is resonate somewhere with your desire to praise Him; but where is this?
- Write down what you think the word 'righteous' means for people today. Is this a word we can easily use in our communication of the Gospel today?

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

1. List the blessings God gives in this Psalm. How many can you relate to?
2. Why do you think that the fate of the wicked is described in this Psalm in such harsh ways? Is the Psalm really harsh?
3. What, having looked at Psalms 33 and 34, are the main reasons for praising God?

## **Final Prayer**

Lord God, You are our Healer. Heal our hearts to give us peace and confidence. Heal our bodies to give us strength and perseverance. Heal our minds to give us wisdom and uprightness. Heal our emotions to give us wholeness and freedom. Heal our souls and make us one with You. In Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN