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A Primer on the Fear of the Lord

Many of us have enjoyed reading biographies. And many of us have benefited from the life stories of notable Christians:

- Samuel Rutherford which is heartbreaking and yet so encouraging.
- J. Gresham Machen, Stonewall Jackson, Charles Spurgeon, and many more.

However, reading biographies can sometimes be very discouraging. When I gaze upon the high points in the lives of these Christians I often forget that these events occurred over the course of fifty plus years. And it is easy to compare my recent life to these highlights and I feel inadequate and never measure up to the activities which the saint of old did for the Lord, the devotional inklings of their soul, their passion, hope, and concern.

Now, this may or may not be your experience reading biographies. However, I would guess that it oft-times is your experience in reading Scripture. Take Psalm 34. It is a most beautiful Psalm. In fact, v. 8 is a memory verse many of us have learned.

Psalm 34:8, "O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!"

Yet the truth be known, we are reading the words of a man who had a walk with God which appears to be so much different from our own. I can't help to think in reading this psalm that when David wrote this, he must have been living on a higher plane!

Psalm 34 can be broken down into five sections:

- David's Intent, vv. 1-3.
- David's Experience, vv. 4-7.
- David's Exhortation, vv. 8-10.
- David's Instruction, vv. 11-14.
- David's Observations, vv. 15-22.

David's Intent

Psalm 34:1, "I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth."

What an incredible statement of intent! Look at the words: "I WILL BLESS THE LORD AT ALL TIMES!" David is saying that no matter what might befall him, it was his plan to honor the Lord through it all!

Psalm 34:2, "My soul shall make its boast in the Lord; the humble shall hear it and rejoice."- not only would he honor God at all times regardless of His providence, David anticipated that this passion would be witnessed by those in humble means which likewise would cause them to rejoice!

Psalm 34:33, "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together."- this is David's desire... he invites any and all who read this psalm to join your heart together with his and exalt the name of the Lord!

As much as I might like to join David here, I know that rarely is my life so godly. Grumbings and bitterness well up in my heart at times. Well, what was the occasion for David's praise?

David's Experience

Psalm 34:4, "I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my

fears.”

Has this been the experience of any here? You seek the Lord and “presto change-o”... the Lord not only answers you, BUT He takes away “all your fears”?

Again, I love this Psalm. It inspires me to strive still harder in my walk. But honestly, like the many biographies I’ve read, I can’t help but walk away from this a little discouraged. This isn’t my life or my experience! I suppose at this time David lived in a Palace where he had anything and everything he needed to encourage him to love the Lord. Quite frankly, that is not where I live!

Psalm 34:5-7, “They [the people who were with David and beheld the Lord’s deliverance] looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed [the idea here is the look of a parent gazing upon their child whom they had given up for lost (Is. 60:5); it is the look of delight and glory combined!]. This poor man cried and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. [How is this so?] The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.”

God has appointed divine helpers to watch over us and protect us as we endeavor to serve the Lord. That in part is why our prayers are so readily answered! Such was David’s experience which lead to his exhortation.

David’s Exhortation

Psalm 34:8, “O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!”

The call of this passage is to do more than to take David’s word at face value. Rather, we are called ourselves to trust the Lord in time... to walk with Him, to get to know Him as we read His word and trust Him to do what He says! If we do this, in David’s view, we will be among the “blessed”- the object of envy!

Psalm 34:9-10, “O fear the Lord, you His saints; for to those who fear Him, there is no want. [if you should doubt it, consider one of the more powerful beasts of the field...] The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek the Lord shall not be in want of any good thing.”

This reminds me of Psalm 127.

Psalm 127:2b, “...For He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep.*”

Such is the care and the commitment of God to each and everyone here! In light of this, David must do more than to give a call to worship. And so we read David’s instruction.

David's Instruction

Psalm 34:11, "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord."

As we'll see (and as the title of this sermon indicates), this is a key theme of this Psalm. The "fear of the Lord" is NOT the dread of the Lord, BUT a heart of praise/adoration in light of an ever growing apprehension of the character of God- His greatness, love, imminence, and care.

In Ephesians 5:18 Paul exhorts the Ephesian church:

Ephesians 5:18, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit"

The word for "filled" is a maritime term used of the wind that fills a sail and so moves the craft wherever it blows. And this is an apt description of "the fear of the Lord." It is living in light of who God is and allowing His character to drive you!

David goes on and describes the life that accompanies a Christian when they "fear the Lord."

Psalm 34:12-14, "Who is the man who desires life, and loves *length of days* that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it."

This is such a great exhortation! If you are going to be one who is driven by God's character:

- Start by NOT "lying!"
- Second, depart from all forms of "evil."
- Strive in all that you do to "do good."
- "Seek" and "pursue peace" in and through all things!

In a nutshell, this is the "fear of the Lord!" Now if you and I will do this, notice what will happen.

David's Observations

1. God will hear your prayer, v. 15.
2. He will deliver you out of "all your troubles," v. 17.
3. If you are crushed in spirit, God will save you and protect you, vv. 18-20.
4. In the end, you'll know complete and total victory, vv. 21-22.

I hope you are struck by the beauty and glory of this Psalm. The call to live a life in reverence to the Lord and to be driven by His character is to know victory, support, and encouragement

in every dark valley! Yet again, this sadly isn't my experience.

I want to serve the Lord, but unlike David here, my experience is that Romans 7:14, *"The things I want to do, I don't. And the things I don't want to do, I oft-times do!"* I don't live in the heights of victory (as obviously David did in his service as king) ... *more often than not, I live in the tyranny of the ordinary... in my own strength relying upon my own resources!*

This no doubt is why this Psalm, though beautiful and glorious, nevertheless doesn't really hit me where I live! David lived in wealth surrounded by advisors, pastors, family, and friends! We live in small houses... relatively alone... more often than not bereft of the love and support of family and friends!

Now, if that is our response to this Psalm, we are amazingly mistaken! Notice the superscription which was written NOT by a Bible translator, BUT by David himself (in fact, in Hebrew Bibles it actually is the first verse. The second verse is OUR first verse).

Psalm 34:0: "A Psalm of David when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who drove him away and he departed."

Like the title "President," "Pharaoh," or "Agag," the Philistines called their Lord/King "Abimelech." Historically David wrote this Psalm AFTER the events of 1 Samuel 21-22:5!¹ Accordingly I would suggest that to understand this Psalm fully, we need to familiarize ourselves with the events of 1 Samuel 21.

Because of Saul's jealousy, David's relationship with his king went from good, to bad, to dangerously awful! Recall after David's initial success as a servant in Saul's court, the women of Jerusalem began singing what would be a dangerous song for David.

1 Samuel 18:7, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

From our study in 1 Samuel you know that Saul couldn't live in a kingdom where someone received more glory than himself. And so from the hearing of this song onward, Saul set his heart to destroy David.

1 Samuel 18:9: "And Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on."

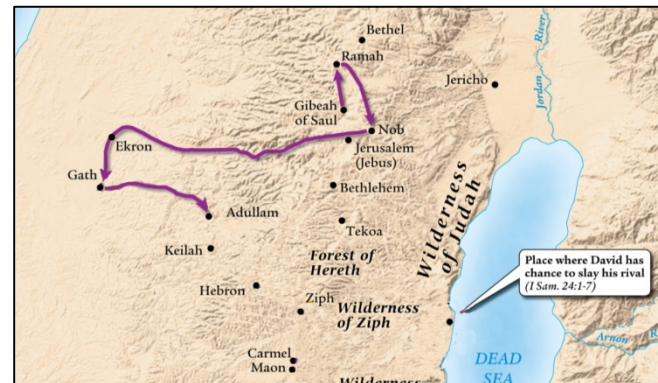
The result of this in David's life was that he began receiving death threats from Saul as spears went zinging past his head on multiple occasions (1 Samuel 18:11; 19:10). It came to a head in 1 Samuel 20 where David confessed to Jonathan (Saul's firstborn son) that Saul had it out for him. Jonathan was shocked! He couldn't imagine anyone, much less his father, not liking David!

So together, David and Jonathan created a test to determine if Saul had it out for David. And sure enough, Jonathan discovered the ugly truth: Saul wanted David dead! Accordingly, 1

Samuel 20 ends with Jonathan and David saying goodbye and David fleeing for his life, which is the focus of 1 Samuel 21:1-22:5!

Now if you study 1 Samuel 21-22:5, you will notice that David's initial response was NOT to flee to God, BUT to resort to differing coping mechanisms of the flesh. David's first place of refuge was deceit.

1 Samuel 21:1, "Then David came to Nob [which after the destruction of Shiloh became the primary priestly city at this time; in fact in the next chapter you'll read of 85 priests being slain here (v. 22)] to Ahimelech the priest [Ahimelech was one of many priests charged with the worship of God. He was the brother of Saul's primary spiritual advisor, Ahijah's (1 Samuel 14:3, 18)]; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David, and said to him, 'Why are you alone and no one with you?'"



By this time, David was well known as a leader in Saul's court. That he therefore was without royal provisions and royal body guards raised Ahimelech's suspicion. What could be going on? David quickly belayed Ahimelech's suspicion.

1 Samuel 21:2, "And David said to Ahimelech the priest, 'The king has commissioned me with a matter, and has said to me, "Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.'"" -

Ah! So David is on a secret mission... that explains it! If you read further, you will note that this was the incident referenced in Matthew 12 where on account of need David and his men ate the consecrated bread. What you must see at this point is that David's first coping mechanism when he was threatened by Saul was NOT to trust the Lord as exhorted in Psalm 34. RATHER, it was to flee like a wild-man doing anything and everything necessary in order to survive. Here, like so many of us when things are difficult, David resorts to lies and deceit! Yet it didn't end here. After David acquired a weapon (Goliath's sword, v. 9), we read of David's second place of refuge, play acting.

1 Samuel 21:10, "Then David arose and fled that day from Saul, and went to Achish king of Gath."

If you search your memory at this point, what is the significance of "Gath"? This is where Goliath was from!

Do you see how impulsive and mindless David is being here? He is NOT thinking, BUT simply

doing! He is running for his life! And in his flight, he arrives in a city whose inhabitants recently lost many a warrior on account of David! And to make matters even worse, he is brandishing Goliath's sword! Not surprisingly, the inhabitants of Gath are suspicious of him.

1 Samuel 21:11, "But the servants of Achish said to him, 'Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands"?'"

This verse indicates that when David arrived in Gath he approached the public judgment seat of Achish. You can just imagine the hush that fell over the assembly at this time and the shocking announcement, "Is this not David the king of the land?"

So what does a man after God's own heart do when so threatened? He acts like a crazed man, for only an idiot would go unprepared to a city which was recently devastated by the actions of the idiot brandishing the word of their most decorated hero.

1 Samuel 21:12-13, "And David took these words to heart, and greatly feared Achish king of Gath. So he disguised his sanity before them, and acted insanely in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard."

In the ancient world you wouldn't kill a crazed man lest the demon/spirit that was believed to be tormenting him attack you. So Achish sends David away. Note however the lengths to which David went in his passion to preserve his life. Rather than trusting God, David secondly resorted to play-acting which is another favorite coping mechanism for us in times of difficulty!

Now, we see that David's third place of refuge is the support of family and many a malcontent.

1 Samuel 22:1-2, "So David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father's household heard *of it*, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented, gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Now there were about four hundred men with him."

David could have sent all these people away... in fact we could argue that he should have sent most of these men away in light of their character (except perhaps his family)! Recall David's standard for those who would serve him:

Psalm 101:6b, "...He who walks in a blameless way is the one who will minister to me."

Yet he didn't send them away! Instead he welcomed any and all who supported him regardless of their character, godliness, or walk with Christ. And this is a third coping

mechanism of the flesh, gather around yourself supporters- “yes men”- who will uphold your cause, commiserate with your suffering, and perform your bidding! That always is the way of the flesh which is why this is such a popular response when trial comes our way.

David had a fourth place of refuge, the support of the wicked.

1 Samuel 22:3-4, “And David went from there to Mizpah of Moab; and he said to the king of Moab, ‘Please let my father and my mother come *and stay* with you until I know what God will do for me.’ Then he left them with the king of Moab; and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.”

Two statements stick out in this description of David’s flight from Saul. The first is David’s flight to “Moab”- which may have been a natural choice since his grandmother came from Moab. However, the significance of this nation to an Israelite is striking. In Numbers 24:17, God spoke of the day when He would totally crush the Moabites! Moab was the nation that wouldn’t allow God’s people to pass through their land during the Exodus (Numbers 21). Moab was the nation that sought to curse Israel with the help of Balaam (Numbers 22-32). Moab was the nation over which Eglon ruled during the time of the Judges (Judges 3).

Accordingly, Moab would NOT be viewed at this time as an ally, but the enemy of God and His people, and His purpose! In fact, it wouldn’t be any time before David wiped out two thirds of the men of this nation following a battle (2 Samuel 8:2)! Yet if this wicked nation could help his cause, David would welcome their support! Such is the end to which we are willing to go when bitter providence descends upon us!

But secondly, we note a subtle shift in the narrative. Again, Hebrew is more inclined to show it than say it; notice what it shows at the end of v. 3 and David’s statement to the king.

1 Samuel 22:3, “Please let my father and my mother come *and stay* with you until I know what God will do for me.”

Wait a second, you mean there is a God who reigns over the Universe? A very present help in time of need (Psalm 46:1)? One on whom we can cast our burdens (Psalm 55:22)? One who will deliver us from every calamity (Psalm 34:4)?

Family of God, you must see that the clouds here are parting in David’s life. After going it alone in the flesh for some time, he finally is turning to the Lord, a turn which leads him to a land of great blessing!

1 Samuel 22:5, “And the prophet Gad said to David, ‘Do not stay in the stronghold; depart, and go into the land of Judah.’”

You must see that this verse reflects NOT ONLY a change in David’s geography, BUT ALSO a

change in his heart- it was NOT just a physical change, IT ALSO was a spiritual one! David went from being a crazed man running for his life, to being a man “dwelling in the shelter of the most High” (Psalm 91:1)!

With this, notice the paltry trust of David! Notice how weak was his faith at first. This is the background of Psalm 34!

Yet, notice also that in the Kingdom of God it is NOT the quantity or the quality of our faith that ultimately matters, IT IS the OBJECT of our faith, Christ the Lord! With that, let’s consider finally the obvious exhortation of Psalm 34.

Fear the Lord

Psalm 34 is an acrostic Psalm, using the Hebrew Alphabet to start each verse (much like Psalm 119 or Proverbs 31). As such, it was intended to give a full-orbed exhortation concerning what ought to move the Christian in times of trouble. In other words, we are NOT dealing here with how a Christian most likely will respond to trouble (it certainly wasn’t David’s first, second, third, or even fourth response to his trial). RATHER, we are talking here of The Ideal and so that to which we must long and aspire- which is why I’ve titled this, “A Primer on the Fear of the Lord”! For example, as an acrostic psalm, Psalm 119 gives us everything we ever wanted to know about the word of God- The Word of God A-Z! And as an acrostic proverb, Proverbs 31 describes NOT any one woman, BUT the perfect woman, the Ideal and so that to which every woman ought to aspire- The A-Z of a Godly Woman!

And this brings us back to Psalm 34! Each of us ought to aspire in our lives as we enter various and sundry valleys of weeping! It is with this that we prepare ourselves and so inspire ourselves as we face life.²

My intention is not to walk with you through this Psalm again (do that this week on your own; it is incredible in light of 1 Samuel 21-22:5). However, I want to point you to David’s obvious focus and so the lesson of this Psalm; and if you haven’t noticed, THE pervading theme of this Psalm is “fear.”

Psalm 34:4, “I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.”

Now which is it? Is David referencing here the fear of Saul? Or is he referencing the multiple fleshly platforms to which he resorted when he was frightened by Saul?! The implication is that we need not live on our own and resort to the many defense mechanisms of the flesh. We have a God who NOT ONLY reigns over the heavens and the earth, BUT also accompanies us.

Psalm 34:7, “The angel of the Lord [ultimately we are here talking about Christ!!!]

encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.”

There is a beautiful contrast here. We can live in the fear of the flesh and do as David did in 1 Samuel 21 (running around like a chicken with its head cut off). OR we can live in the fear of the Lord and live in confidence, boldness, and peace! In Psalm 34, from his own personal experience, David is arguing for the latter.

Psalm 34:8-9, “O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! [How do we “taste” the goodness of God? How do we “take refuge in Him”? The answer...] O fear the Lord, you His saints; for to those who fear Him, there is no want.”

It comes down to this: How Big is Your God? And will you rely upon that God?!

When harsh times descend and you are faced with giants way too big for you, to whom or to what will you go? Will you respond as David initially did by resorting to

- Deceit (1 Samuel 21:1-9)?
- Play-acting (1 Samuel 21:10-15)?
- The support of the malcontent in your life- misery loves company (1 Samuel 22:1-2).
- The wicked (1 Samuel 22:3-4)?

From personal experience, David denounced these all too-common coping mechanisms.

Psalm 34:11, 13-14a, “Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord... Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good...”

Do you see? Psalm 34 was written from an experience of utter failure as a Christian! Thus you must see that David’s exhortation here is NOT theoretical, BUT quite practical. Through his failure David learned to “seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness” (Matthew 6:33)- and he wants us to do the same!

So where ought our focus? From David’s personal experience, God exhorts us to place our focus on a God who will never leave or abandon us, but will always help us, and so in the end will deliver us from ALL our enemies.

Psalm 34:15, 17-19, 22, “¹⁵The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry [that is the God that accompanies you even when you are living in the flesh]... ¹⁷*The righteous* cry and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles [this is what David came to know personally and practically]. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all [But what if those same individuals

at first reject God to go it alone in the flesh? Can they expect God still to carry them? Will He carry them? Indeed!]... ²²The Lord redeems the soul of His servants; and none of those who take refuge in Him [regardless of what they have done] will be condemned.”

Family of God, for most of us here it is “fair weather”- is it not? Rutherford said, “In fair weather, mend the sails!” Accordingly labor now in anticipation of the day of weeping! Set your heart on discovering the greatness of your God, His sovereignty, His glory, His awesomeness! But also come to know “the nearness of God”- for in the words of Asaph, “...it is our good” (Psalm 73:28)!

End Note(s)

¹ There are eight Psalms which by their inscriptions are assigned to the time of David’s persecution by Saul (Psalms composed by David during the horrors of battle and flight from Gibeon of Saul to Ziklag). Their chronological order would be Pss. 7, 59, 56, 34, 52, 57, 142, & 54!

² Will we uphold the teachings of this Psalm in our lives as Christians? David most certainly wouldn’t. But that didn’t stop him from making this the longing of his life and so the content of his prayer!!!