

# The Goodness of God

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A sermon given on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **Psalm 34**, Matthew 6:25-34

## Introduction

Do you write poetry? I'm not a great poet, but I have penned a few ditties over the years. What about reading poetry? If you read it at all, are you a fan of classical poets like Keats, Tennyson, Shakespeare, or more modern poets? What does poetry do for you, I wonder? For me, poetry can help me express my own thoughts, or I can be inspired by the thoughts and imagination of another person. Poetry, like art or music, can enable us to see the world in a new way.

If you come to church services where hymns are sung, you will be exposed to poetry there. And in services where we sing or say psalms you will be exposed to a great collection of ancient religious poetry written over several centuries on a wide range of topics.

A humorous ditty goes,

*King David and King Solomon led merry, merry lives,  
with many, many lady friends and many, many wives.  
But when old age caught up with them with all its many qualms,  
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs and King David wrote the Psalms.*

There are, not surprisingly, a couple of inaccuracies in this statement as far as King David is concerned. Not all of the psalms were written by him – in fact 73 of the 150 are attributed to David, some are anonymous and others are attributed to various worship leaders of the later Temple. And second, writing poetry isn't just for people who are too old to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh!

The psalms in the Bible are a resource that are neglected by many Christians. In the past, psalms for many Anglicans were all too often written in nearly incomprehensible old-fashioned language chanted drearily to music that was impossible to follow. On the other hand, many modern churches neither sing the psalms nor read them.

But for millions of people down the centuries, both Christians and Jews, the book of psalms contains poems and songs that cover the whole range of experiences and emotions, from despair in the midst of suffering and injustice to exuberant praise at experiences of God's power and love.

Some are about God himself – his character of love, his power in creation and his deeds in history. Some are about the writer's experience – perhaps gratitude to God for answered prayer, or prayers composed out of an experience of incomprehensible suffering and a sense of being abandoned by God. Jesus himself was well versed in the psalms, and saw in them prophetic messages about his own role as the Messiah. On the cross he poured out his own sense of separation from God in the opening words of Psalm 22, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

During the course of the next few weeks we will be examining a range of psalms with different themes, which I hope will give you an appetite to become familiar with them yourselves. Like all poetry, different psalms will speak to you in different situations. If you want to learn how to worship God, by which I mean really focussing on him and learning to express your love and appreciation, there are some amazing psalms of praise that will expand your repertoire of praise. If you need words to express a sense of confusion about unanswered prayers, or if you are trying to make sense of the continuing presence of evil in the world, there are psalms for you. If you want words to use to pray for our nation or for the church, or to wonder at the creation, there are prayers for you in the psalms.

## Psalm 34

*Through all the changing scenes of life,  
in trouble and in joy,  
the praises of my God shall still  
my heart and tongue employ.*

This first verse of a well-known hymn is a rendering in English verse of the beginning of Psalm 34 which we heard a few minutes ago. The message of the Psalm shows that it was written by someone who has experienced God's goodness for himself, and wants to praise God for his deliverance and protection.

I will bless the LORD at all times;  
his praise shall continually be in my mouth<sup>1</sup>.

This is not someone who is just dutifully saying his prayers – he cannot stop praising God, and his experience and knowledge of God, which permeates the whole poem, is evidence of a life which has God at the centre.

Verses 4 and 6 both talk of answers to prayer:

I sought the LORD, and he answered me,  
and delivered me from all my fears.  
...This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,  
and was saved from every trouble.

But the psalm is not just an expression of the Psalmist's own experience: he wants to encourage others to trust in God and discover his goodness and care for themselves. Verse 2 says

My soul makes its boast in the LORD;  
let the humble hear and be glad.

The second verse of the hymn, which is not in many modern hymn books, puts it like this:

*Of his deliv'rance I will boast,  
till all that are distressed  
from my example comfort take,  
and charm their griefs to rest.*

And so the psalmist encourages his hearers in verses 5 and 8 to turn to the Lord themselves:

<sup>5</sup> Look to him, and be radiant;  
so your faces shall never be ashamed.

<sup>8</sup> O taste and see that the LORD is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in him.

Verse 9 introduces a key concept which will be repeated throughout the psalm – the fear of the Lord.

<sup>9</sup> O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,  
for those who fear him have no want.

This phrase needs a word of explanation. Does it mean that we should be afraid of God? Such an idea seems to go against the sense of trust in God which the psalmist clearly has himself, and is seeking to encourage in others. It also jars with our modern sense of independence and autonomy. Surely we don't want to believe that God is some kind of dictator who terrifies us into obedience?

There's a whole package of cultural assumptions here which we don't have time to properly explore in this sermon. Let me just say that if God is really the all-powerful creator of sub-atomic particles and vast galaxies, and if he is also the final arbiter of right and wrong in the universe, we

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<sup>1</sup> Compare 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 and Philippians 4:4-7

should have every reason to be terrified of him. But the God we believe in chooses to deal with us as a compassionate Father<sup>2</sup>, who is willing not only to forgive our sins and give us the opportunity for healing and restoration, but even to become weak and vulnerable as the baby laid in a manger in Bethlehem.

Such a God is massively worthy of our deepest respect and reverence – and this is what “the fear of the Lord” means<sup>3</sup>.

And what it means in practice to show respect for God is explained by the Psalmist in verses 11-14:

<sup>11</sup> Come, O children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

<sup>12</sup> Which of you desires life,  
and covets many days to enjoy good?

<sup>13</sup> Keep your tongue from evil,  
and your lips from speaking deceit.

<sup>14</sup> Depart from evil, and do good;  
seek peace, and pursue it.

Being a believer in the God of the Bible isn't about finding a system of belief that enhances your life, that “works for you”. That would be a very self-centred attitude. This psalm speaks of a relationship with God that is symbiotic – in other words, it works both ways. The believer trusts in God, enjoys his help and protection, and in return seeks to fashion his or her life in accordance with God's commandments. This is what it means to be “righteous” in the Old Testament. Being righteous means being in a right relationship with God and with others. We choose to align our thinking and behaviour with God's ways, and as a result experience the blessings of God's help and protection.

Our hymn paraphrases verse 9 in these words:

Fear him, ye saints, and you will then  
have nothing else to fear:  
make you his service your delight,  
he'll make your wants his care.

The life of the righteous is contrasted with that of the wicked – in other words those whose lives are based on a “me first” attitude that totally disregards the interests of others and the will of their Creator. Here again we need to understand the terminology and recognise a theme which runs through the Old Testament and is expressed in many psalms: the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. These are both, if you like, descriptions of the two extremes of human behaviour: total dedication to God and obedience to his commandments on the one hand, and a godless selfishness on the other, which results in the oppression of the poor and contempt for God. The psalms are clear that God will not tolerate such behaviour, and his just response to it is shown in verse 16:

<sup>16</sup> The face of the LORD is against evildoers,  
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

As Christians, we are aware of a more nuanced description of human beings as being both sinful and capable of redemption. But that is another sermon!

This aspect of Psalm 34 puts it in the category of a Wisdom psalm – one that advises the readers how to live in harmony with the order of the universe and the will of God. In today's world, with so many voices promising us happiness if we will buy this, entertain ourselves with that game or “be true to our real identity”, we need all the wisdom we can get to avoid deceptive and alluring messages and find the straight and narrow road to life<sup>4</sup>. We don't need the warnings of Psalm 34

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<sup>2</sup> See Psalm 103:8-14

<sup>3</sup> See also the famous quotation about the fear of the Lord in Proverbs 9:10

<sup>4</sup> Read Jesus' words about the narrow and the broad ways in Matthew 7:13-14

to see that following the broad and apparently easy path that many go down leads ultimately to destruction.

### **In times of trouble**

To summarise what we've seen so far: the writer of Psalm 34 encourages us to trust in God, and not only testifies to his own experience of answered prayer but also argues that it is God's normal practice to deliver those who respect him and trust in him. But does that mean that we can assume God will never let us suffer?

No. The very fact that the writer has experienced deliverance shows that before he cried out to God he was suffering, although the nature of that suffering is not described. Verse 18 is a beautiful promise about God being alongside those who are facing mental or spiritual anguish:

<sup>18</sup>The LORD is near to the broken-hearted,  
and saves the crushed in spirit.

The Psalmist acknowledges that the righteous may indeed suffer many hardships, but that they will ultimately be saved:

<sup>19</sup>Many are the afflictions of the righteous,  
but the LORD rescues them from them all.

### **Is this for real?**

So what difference could this message make for my life? Is Psalm 34 just a collection of nice platitudes about God and a woolly optimism that if you trust God all will be well? Is this for real?

I think whether you and I will experience God's goodness in a tangible way all depends on how close we want to get to God. We saw earlier that the psalmist is speaking about a relationship with God that is committed, wholehearted and personal. No doctor would advise a person who has had a heart attack to cut out the occasional packet of crisps or cut down from 40 cigarettes a day to 30. Being healthy isn't about eating the odd stick of celery or walking 50 yards once a week. It's about an attitude to the whole of life.

The same is true with having the kind of relationship with God that is being recommended in the psalm. Knowing God's goodness and care for yourself can be very real. But we need to get close to him to do that.

Here's an illustration which Mike our youthworker posted on Facebook this week:

A boy asked his Father: "Dad what is the size of GOD?"

Then the Father looked up at the Sky and saw a Plane and asked his son: "What is the size of this Plane?"

The boy replied: "it is very small. I can hardly see it."

Then the father took him to the airport and as they approached a plane, he asked: "Now, my son, how big is this Plane?"

The boy replied: "Wow dad, it's huge!"

Then the father told him: "God's size depends on how close or far you are to him. The closer you are to him, the Greater and Greater he will be in your life!"

How close do we want to get to God? The experience of the Psalmist, and of countless people down the centuries, is that God is loving, faithful and strong to save. For those who want to discover this for themselves, the invitation is open:

<sup>8</sup>O taste and see that the LORD is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in him.

### Supplementary notes on Psalm 34

There are two other features of this psalm that are worth mentioning, although they do not affect the meaning of the psalm. The first is the title, which appears in most English translations and is part of the Hebrew text:

*Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.*

This links the psalm to 1 Samuel 21:10ff, an incident in the life of David where his life was in danger. A good number of the psalms have titles, many of which simply ascribe the psalm to a particular author, but others (e.g. Psalms 4-9) have what seem to be directions to the worship leader about tunes or instruments to use. These titles or introductions are ancient, but may not have been part of the original text of the psalm.

The second interesting feature, which can only be seen in the Hebrew text, is that the poem is an acrostic, with the verses beginning with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the alphabet, and this psalm (like others such as Psalm 145) has 22 verses. But there is one letter missing (waw, or “w”, which is the 6<sup>th</sup> letter of the alphabet), so it is possible that a verse has dropped out after verse 5. The last verse should therefore be 21, which begins with the last letter of the alphabet, tau. But an additional verse has been added to bring the number up to 22.