



ELMWOOD
MB CHURCH

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“Tasting the Goodness of God Through Pain &
Despair”
Psalm 34
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PROLOGUE

I'm not sure if many or any of you have read Timothy Keller's book, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*. It is a powerful book, punctuated with testimonies of people whose experiences of suffering make my worst days seem no more than a paper cut. The testimony of one woman named Mary began at three years old when her alcoholic parents divorced. Marrying as soon as she could to flee her psychotic alcoholic mother, she soon became the victim of severe physical abuse at the hand of her older husband. She left him and reconnected with her father, only to be sexually molested by him. Escaping this, she found Christ, re-married, and eventually had 3 children. But before her oldest began school, Mary was diagnosed with a massive brain tumor, partially inoperable. Later, while dealing with rebellious teenagers, one diagnosed as schizophrenic, her husband had two strokes that incapacitated him. Faced with a precarious financial situation, they eventually lost their house. ***How would you face all of this?***

Mary writes: “*Christ's gift of peace to us amid the heartache and craziness comes as we trust him to handle the pain and anxiety of situations we cannot. Problems don't disappear, and life continues, but He replaces the sting of those heartaches with hope, which has been an amazing realization – the hope is **NOT** in the problem's solution, but in focusing on Christ, who facilitates the change, and will someday take heartache away completely and forever.*” ***Has this been your abiding comfort in the difficult issues you encounter in life? Is Mary's response one you would be satisfied with from God – no solution to the problem, but a hope in Christ that affliction cannot destroy?***

PRAYER – Please pray with me as I begin:

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Psalms of David, we often see inscriptions accompanying the title that tie the Psalm David has written to an historical event. David often wrote a Psalm as a testimony to how God met him in a situation he found overwhelming and beyond his ability to escape. And so this morning, we will look at **Psalm 34** which has the inscription, “*Of David, when he changed his behaviour before Abimelech, so that he drove him out and he went away.*”

This refers to 1 Samuel 21, which gives us the history, but Ps. 34 expresses the deep turmoil of soul David struggled with, not simply for a day or two, but quite likely for months at a time, with no clear escape.

And so, from his experience, there are insights that can lead us to the rescue we need from God when we face circumstances that seem to trap us, threaten us, oppress us, and encircle us with discouragement, even despair and a sense of hopelessness.

Has anyone ever experienced this? Perhaps experiencing this even now? We look at the narrative and say, *“Well I haven’t had numerous spears thrown at me, and hunting parties chasing me down, so maybe this is beyond what I’m experiencing.”* Or, maybe you think, *“Christians should not despair, so if I really belong to Jesus, I need to just get over this!”*

But then there’s the Apostle Paul, who in 2Cor. 1:8 confessed, *“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we **despaired of life itself.**”* Really? Paul experienced that level of discouragement? Despairing of life itself?!? Yes!! What can we learn from Ps. 34, that will help us face circumstances we would either fear, or feel overwhelmed by, with courage and confidence in the Lord instead? I think that this Psalm teaches us that we habitually need to be,

TASTING THE GOODNESS OF GOD THROUGH PAIN AND DESPAIR.

We’re often tempted to literally scream out our affliction to God, something admittedly even David did as in Ps. 13, where he cries out, *“How long O LORD?”* 3 times in only 6 verses! But even then, he counters his despair with an assurance of God’s steadfast love and salvation. In Ps. 36, David emphasizes: *“Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens; How precious is your steadfast love, O God!; Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you.”*(vv. 5,7,10) In Ps. 35:3 he even asks the LORD to, *“Say to my soul, “I am your salvation!”*

Here in the first 10 verses of Ps. 34, David is looking back, NOT because all of his problems have magically disappeared, BUT because he remembers how in every circumstance of life – whether discouragements, betrayals, or the threats of death – the LORD hears AND answers, and he has every reason to praise HIM. *What he is screaming at US, in fact is:*

1. THE CERTAINTY OF GOD’S CARE vv. 1-10

What does he draw our attention to? Look at the first words coming out of his mouth:

1.1 The Priority of Praise vv. 1-3

David loves the Gospel. How, you ask? No one who holds fast, to the sovereignty of God, and also to his unique attribute of steadfast love, could otherwise bless God at all times, praising Him continually regardless of circumstance. It’s like he’s anticipating Paul’s words in Romans 8:28, *“And we know that for those who love God **all things work together** for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*

The second clue comes in what David boasts in – *“My soul makes its boast in the LORD.”* This truth the LORD explains in more detail in Jer. 9:23-24: *“Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows ME, that I am the LORD, who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”*

When a person finds their self-worth and assurance in the new identity they receive by placing all their faith in what Jesus Christ has done to secure their forgiveness and eternal security, *THEN* fears and anxieties arising from our inability to control every circumstance we face lose their power over us. Nothing takes God by surprise. When David says, *“let the humble hear and be glad”*, the Hebrew word he uses, **‘anav’**, expresses the poor, depressed, afflicted, and meek. In other words, *“at all times”*, we have reason to rejoice: Magnifying and exalting the Lord should be our immediate default when we feel overwhelmed beyond our capacity. We cannot handle it, but we belong to the God who can and will walk with us through it.

As Paul spoke with assurance in 2 Cor.12:10, *“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* David then points to his own experience:

1.2 The Reality of Rescue vv. 4-7

Vv. 2 & 3 began a sequence, that essentially said, *“I have reason to praise Him; join me in doing so!”* Here in vv. 4 & 6, the second stage is, *“This was my personal experience; it can be yours, too!”* David emphasizes finally in vv. 5 & 7, *“God rescued me; therefore, you also are safe in His hands!”* David is using the common Hebraic style of repetition to emphasize his point – *“When faced with difficulty of any sort, look first to God, earnestly seek Him”*. **WHY?** Because the LORD not only HEARS your cry, He ANSWERS your pleas. **HOW?**

i) He delivers you from your fears – ALL your fears! And they could be many – the Hebrew word here refers to a granary or storehouse! It’s kind of a ‘eureka moment’ when you realize, that though from a human perspective, this circumstance looks overwhelming and could crush me with enormous affliction, pain, or loss, because I have no capability to control it... YET, because of who God is – entirely in control, and forever committed to my care with his steadfast love – I have no real reason to fear, nor be ashamed that I’m putting my trust and faith in Him. And...

ii) He saves you out of all your troubles – ALL your troubles! Does this mean they all vanish in an instant, as though you’ve just rubbed a magic lamp and beckoned a genie to your rescue? NO! David remained a fugitive after his escape from Gath. While God enabled that escape, David was still years from a more stable life. As v.7 describes and v.19 expands on later, the LORD *“encamps around those who fear him”*. In other words, He is with you in the

midst of the circumstance you desperately want to escape – *He's there with you and you still want to run away?*

Realistically, if you had the opportunity to push a 're-set button', or have a 'do-over', how far back would you **really** need to go, to escape all of the difficult situations that you've gone through in your entire life, and with them, all of the good that has come out of them, by patiently persevering through them, learning more about the love of God, than you would otherwise have never discovered?

Finally in vv. 8-10 he completes his unbridled enthusiasm for the certainty of God's care, by calling us to:

1.3 The Taste of Satisfaction vv. 8-10

V. 8 is probably the one that most believers are able to quote; *"Taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the person who takes refuge in Him!"* Maybe, though, the verse is so familiar, it's lost its power for you? Perhaps look at it from its intended implication: *"The only way of truly seeing and knowing that the Lord is good is by tasting; the only person who is blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him."*

Think about David's experiences leading up to his composition of this Psalm: he was alone, destitute, hungry, and without any means of self-protection, uncertain even of how long his life would last. He was quite possibly at the lowest point in his life, when everything seemed against him, as one commentator put it, *'between a rock (king Saul) and a hard place (King Achish)'* (Boice).

Ever felt like this – a perfect storm bearing down on you at what seems to be your weakest moment?! But what does **he** say? *"Taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the person who takes refuge in Him!"*

What is it to taste, really?! Is it simply believing that there may be a god out there somewhere? Because you grew up in a Christian home, or made a decision at summer camp? A starving person is not satisfied by simply walking by the tables of food at the Sunday smorgasbord at the Hotel Fort Garry, and agreeing, "Yes, there's food there" – NO – they have to sit down and slowly savour, small portions at a time, until energy and peace of mind return, and the food is not just carbs and calories – it is a culinary delight! This is how David remarks about his experience, being filled with radiance, from the joy of being in the care of such a good God. This is so much more than simply 'believing' – which as James reminds us, is something that even the demons do (James 2:19)

What is it to take refuge in Him, really?! This is surrendering all of the pretensions you might have about somehow getting out of your circumstances by your own strength, or ingenuity, or whatever. To fear the Lord is *revering, being in awe of*, this all-powerful God who hears your cries and delights to come and sustain you, refresh you, walk with you in your pain, reassure

you of his care. Compared to the most powerful hunters, the lions, who at times struggle to stay alive, YOU lack no good thing in the care of the God who loves you so much. His Son died to pay for your wretched rebellion against Him – how much more will He continue to take care of one He has redeemed at such a great cost?!

Have you ever had one of those moments, stuck in the midst of a terrifying circumstance that has engulfed you in a fear you don't know how to shake? Though you know you should trust God, and you want to...all you can muster up is a cry to God, *"Help me Lord."* And then you find that somehow peace has inexplicably replaced the fear, remarkably, even as the circumstances that caused the fear have not changed? And then you wonder – *"Why did it take so long for me to experience THAT level of knowing that the Lord is THAT good? That I really lack no good thing?"*

I don't know all of your stories, or the particular circumstances that brought you to that moment. For me, it was not at the moment I was told I had aggressive cancer, nor in the quarterly hormone shots, but strangely enough, it came each day that I lay on the table for a round of radiation. As I prayed each day during those 6-8 minutes, thankfulness and praise became more rich, and joyful, and I had peace, that whatever the outcome of those treatments would be, God would get the glory. And remarkably this experience brought to mind other circumstances, years gone by, where the Lord called me to trust regardless of the outcome. This, of course, is David's thrust as he heads into the second half of the Psalm where he takes the invitation to share his experience a step further, in declaring:

2. THE REWARD OF A RIGHTEOUS LIFE vv. 11-22

At first glance at this point, there is the danger of some people saying, as Job's friends did to him, that if you live right, God will bless you. This of course has a ring of truth to it, but it goes sideways when it becomes a transactional mindset – you know, *"If I do what I know God likes, he is in my debt, and therefore owes me blessing."* This mindset is what sets all religions apart from Christianity. All other religions bind their adherents to an unceasing, obedience to their god, in the hope that *maybe* their performance will offset their failures and gain their god's eternal approval.

If this is your perspective of Christianity, then you have never really met Jesus Christ. Nor have you likely read the Bible, because as David shows here, living a righteous life is not a performance to earn God's acceptance, or escape all trouble. No – there is no one who can do that. Christ alone was perfectly obedient. Only in surrendering our lives by faith to the truth that His self-sacrifice is our only certain hope for forgiveness, is His righteousness imputed to us.

But let's look at living a righteous life, without even considering the spiritual reasons for it. David tells us plainly that,

2.1 A Righteous Life Just Makes Sense vv. 11-14

In v. 12 he is basically asking, *“Who doesn’t want to have the best life?”* In the Message version, Peterson translates this, *“Who out there has a lust for life? Can’t wait each day to come upon beauty?”* Isn’t this a universal human aspiration? What does the Golden Rule tell us? *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”*. And so, he follows with the most basic instruction: *“Don’t speak or plan evil and deceit against another – instead turn away from evil and do good – seek peace, not conflict; in fact pursue that continuously!!”* Wouldn’t everyone want others to treat them this way?

Alas! Apparently not! Anticipating our incredulity at this, and our question, “WHY?!” David reminds us earlier in Psalm 14, *“The fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God.’ Who understands, who seeks after God? ‘They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good, not even one.’* Ok...but we still want to scream out “WHY?!” For this we have Paul’s words in 2Cor. 4:4, *“the god of this world has blinded the **minds** of the unbelievers.”* And, Titus 1:15, *“to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.”*

So, it makes sense from a strictly practical reason to live what the Bible calls a righteous lifestyle. Vv. 13 & 14 describe an attitude to life that considers others as well as oneself. But early on in the history of humanity, in the lives of Adam & Eve in fact, things changed. Timothy Keller describes it this way:

“To enjoy a good life (v.12) you must live a good life (vv.13 & 14). This challenges the lie of the serpent in Eden that if we obey God fully, we will be miserable, that rich living happens outside God’s will, not within it. This lie has passed deeply into every human heart: that we would be happier if we, rather than God, were free to choose how our lives should be lived.” Common sense should be reason enough to live well, instead of selfishly, just looking after number one, and the eventual evil that follows to sustain that. And so, David gives us the more accurate reason to live righteous lives:

2.2 A Righteous Life Reflects the Character of God vv. 15-16

Verse 11 reminds us of Prov. 9:10-11, *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and by the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life.”* In choosing to live by the precepts of God, a person refutes the lie of the serpent that deceived Adam and Eve, so that even when our limited understanding of God’s purposes challenge how we understand circumstances that cause us pain, affliction, even fear for our future, we will still remain confident that He hears our cries and cares for us.

Only in embracing the Gospel do we realize our ultimate good is knowing God personally, born again to a new identity as His child, with the promise of eternal life with him. But to choose the enemy’s lie, is to choose the tragic, ultimate punishment, to personally lose the face of God forever (v. 16), the only real source of lasting joy and love. C.S. Lewis describes the finality of

this: *“It’s to be left utterly and absolutely outside – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored for eternity.”*

But you might well be asking, *“What does this have to do with the circumstances I’m facing right now that are challenging my faith?”* “Can’t I in desperation pray even as David periodically exclaimed in prayer, *“Make haste, O God, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me!”* (Ps. 70:1)? But why does he more often pray, *“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust, I shall not be afraid, What can flesh do to me?!”* (Ps. 56:3,4) He tells us in the last 6 verses:

2.3 A Righteous Life Has God’s Presence in All Circumstances vv. 17-22

The enemy, whose lie set humanity on a course of rebellion from God, hates that God’s blessing accompanies the life of whoever God declares righteous. We see this in his comment to God about Job, who was described as *“blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”* (Job 1:1) *“Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the works of his hands and his possessions have increased in the land.”* (Job 1:9-10)

Satan was suggesting, as we looked at earlier, that living a righteous life is only to get God’s blessing. As is true with any of Satan’s declarations, the opposite is true. It is knowing the unspeakable gift of grace, which reconciliation to God is, that **compels** us to righteousness, *out of gratitude* to God for such forgiveness we find hard to give even ourselves, much less others who have wronged us!! We **want** to live righteous lives, not only out of thanksgiving, but because we long to delight the God who cares for us like no one else can.

What does that care look like? We cry to Him – He sees us, hears us, and delivers us. He’s near to us when our hearts feel broken, when we’re crushed in spirit. He’s redeemed us from a penalty of death we could never escape, no matter how well we lived, and he promises us refuge in any circumstance, protection from ultimately the accusations Satan makes before him and to us.

But it is critical to understand deliverance correctly. We might feel torn between two extremes: *one*, the expectation that we’re entitled to a carefree life with no pain, anxiety, or discouragements; and the *opposite extreme* of feeling like you have to apologize on God’s behalf when the outcome of your problem and prayer didn’t turn out the way you wanted it to. Perhaps we are let down by David’s observation that, *“many are the afflictions of the righteous”*?

But as we heard in Mary’s testimony at the beginning of the sermon, the Christian has a hope that cannot be vanquished, a hope that transcend the circumstance of affliction. In his insightful commentary on the Psalms, Derek Kidner writes, *“The sweeping affirmation of v. 19,*

("but the Lord delivers him out of them all"), urges the mind forward to look beyond death, if such a promise is to be honoured. While a person's suffering may well be extreme, God never takes it lightly and never loses control." John Newton once said about God's control, "Everything is needful that He sends; nothing can be needful that He withholds."

In his book on suffering, Tim Keller has a section entitled, Walking with God IN the Furnace. He quotes Isaiah 43:2-3,5: *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy one of Israel, your Saviour...DO not be afraid, for I am with you."* Keller comments, *"The promise is not to remove us from the experience of suffering – NO – the promise is that God will be with us, walking beside us in it. Isaiah's comment indicates that while God's people will be in the heat, the heat will not be in them. That is, it won't enter and poison their souls, harden their hearts, or bring them to despair."*

CONCLUSION

In Psalm 77, David recalls a situation where he was so troubled he could not speak; but then his heart meditated and his spirit made a diligent search, asking some tough rhetorical questions, and then drawing the obvious conclusion: To each of these questions I invite you to say aloud with me, "NO!"

⁷ "Will the Lord reject forever? NO!

Will he never show his favor again? NO!

⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever? NO!

Has his promise failed for all time? NO!

⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful? NO!

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" NO! Thank you!

¹⁰ Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:

the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

¹² I will consider all your works

and meditate on all your mighty deeds."

¹³ Your ways, God, are holy.

What god is as great as our God?

¹⁴ You are the God who performs miracles;

you display your power among the peoples."

This is the God who has committed Himself to you, if you have committed yourself to Him. Taste and see that HE alone is good – do this continually – in no other way will we find the courage and perseverance to face affliction and still honor Him beyond our understanding. Amen.