

Psalm 34

19th, 20th & 21st Sunday Year B
4th Lent Year C; Saints Peter & Paul
Prayer during the Day Saturday Week 1 and 3
Evening Prayer Guardian Angels Oct 2

Recalling how YHWH responded to his cry of distress, the psalmist is encouraging others to follow his example by placing their trust in YHWH who is ‘near to those whose hearts are broken and saves those whose spirit is crushed’ (verse 18). It is important also that they ‘stop doing evil and do good’ (verse 14). Sixteen times he mentions YHWH by name. Like Psalm 9-10 and Psalm 25, this is an acrostic psalm (though the letter ‘w’ [ו] is missing between verse 5 and verse 6). The title reads ‘Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech so that he drove him out, and he went away’. The reference is to the scene recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. A copyist has erroneously written ‘Abimelech’ instead of Achish.

¹ [ו] I will bless* YHWH* at all times, his praise continually on my lips.

² [ב] With praise my whole being* glories in YHWH; let the lowly* hear and be glad.

‘My whole being’ translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See the article ‘Being’ in the Introduction.

The psalmist ‘glories in YHWH’. It is his communion with YHWH that matters most to him and nothing gives him greater joy than to proclaim this to others. The word ‘glories’ can be translated ‘boasts’. We find ‘boast’ used in this sense in both Jeremiah and Paul:

Thus says YHWH: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast do so in this, that they understand and know me, that I am YHWH; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 9:23-24

We boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

– Romans 5:11

Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

– 1 Corinthians 1:31; 2 Corinthians 10:17

We boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.

– Philippians 3:3

³ [א] O sing of YHWH’s greatness with me, and together let us exalt his name.

To ‘exalt his name’ is to proclaim God’s sublime transcendence.

As we pray verse five we might think of Moses caught up in contemplation for forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai. On his descent the people were amazed, so radiant was his face with divine light (see Exodus chapter 34). We might also recall Jesus at his transfiguration where his ‘face shone like the sun’ (Matthew 17:2), or John’s depiction of the exalted Jesus whose ‘eyes were like a flame of fire ... his face like the sun shining with full force’ (Revelation 1:14,16). We recall, too, Paul’s exhortation that with unveiled faces we look upon God’s glory radiating from the face of Jesus. As we look upon him we reflect his glory as we are transformed into his image (2Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6).

The letter ‘w’[ו] is missing here.

The psalmist was experiencing distress and YHWH heard his cry. He is encouraging others to follow his example.

In their concern to preserve the transcendence of God, the Hebrews spoke of ‘the angel of YHWH’, an expression which referred, not to a created spirit-being, but to God as we encounter God in the events of our history. The classical text is in the account of the escape of the Hebrews from their Egyptian pursuers at the Red Sea:

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them.

– Exodus 14:19

YHWH was the one surrounding and protecting them.

In a cult setting the reference is to taking part in the communion sacrifice. ‘Taste and see’ can also refer to contemplation in which we savour the goodness of God. We find this verse echoed in the New Testament:

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that YHWH is good.

– 1Peter 2:2-3

It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit.

– Hebrews 6:4

4 [ו] I sought out YHWH, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

5 [ו] Look to him, and be radiant, and you will never have to hide your face in shame.

6 [ו] This poor person cried, and YHWH heard him, and saved* him from every danger.

7 [ו] The angel of YHWH encamps around those who fear* him, and protects them.

8 [ט] O taste and see that YHWH is good; happy* are you who take refuge in him.

Fear of YHWH

⁹ [י] Fear* YHWH, you his holy ones, for those who fear* him lack nothing.

See the article ‘Fear of YHWH’ in the Introduction. Only God is holy. The assembled people are called ‘holy’ because God has chosen to be present in their midst. We might reflect on the following texts:

You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

– Exodus 19:6

Some of the leaders of the congregation assembled against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, ‘You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, everyone of them, and YHWH is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of YHWH?’

– Numbers 16:3

You shall be holy, for I YHWH your God am holy.

– Leviticus 19:2

I am YHWH your God; I have separated you from the peoples.

– Leviticus 20:24

You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be acknowledged as holy among the people of Israel: I am YHWH; I make you holy, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am YHWH.

– Leviticus 22:32-33

I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I will walk among you. I will be your God, and you shall be my people.

– Leviticus 26:11-12

¹⁰ [צ] The rich and powerful suffer want and hunger, but the person who seeks after YHWH lacks nothing good.

The standard Hebrew text has *k^epîrîm* (‘young lions’). It is likely that this is a copyist’s mistake for Hebrew *k^ebîrîm*, meaning ‘the rich and powerful’. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and everything else will be given you as well.

– Matthew 6:33

¹¹ [ב] Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear* of YHWH.

This theme is frequent in Deuteronomy:

Assemble the people – men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns – so that they may hear and learn to fear YHWH your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law, and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear YHWH your God, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.

– Deuteronomy 31:12-13

Compare the following from the New Testament:

Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.

– 1Peter 3:8-9

Peter goes on to quote verses twelve to sixteen (leaving out the last phrase). Compare also the following from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

– Hebrews 12:14

Verse seventeen expresses a central theme of the psalms. For verse eighteen compare:

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and crushed heart, O God, you will not despise.

– Psalm 51:17

The people experience suffering, but their ‘bones’ will not be broken. Just as bones survive death, so the nation will continue on. This truth was symbolically represented in the Passover ceremony in which no bone of the lamb was broken: ‘You shall not break any of its bones’ (Exodus 12:46). John draws attention to this as he depicts Jesus on the cross: ‘These things occurred so that scripture might be fulfilled: None of his bones shall be broken’ (John 19:36). Physical death cannot destroy Jesus’ life.

Verse twenty-two stands outside the alphabetical structure. It is added as a summary of the central theme of the psalm.

12 [מ] Are you one who desires life, and wants a long and prosperous life?

13 [נ] Well, then, keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

14 [ז] Stop doing evil, and do good; seek peace*, and pursue it.

15 [ח] The eyes of YHWH are on the just, his ears are open to their cry.

16 [ט] The face of YHWH confronts evildoers, to cut off all memory of them from the earth.

17 [י] When you cry out for help, YHWH hears, and rescues you from every danger.

18 [יא] YHWH is near to those whose hearts are broken, and comes to the help of those whose spirits are crushed.

19 [יב] Many are the afflictions of the just*, but YHWH rescues them from them all.

20 [יג] He keeps guard over all their bones; not one of them will be broken.

21 [יד] Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the just* will be condemned.

22 YHWH redeems the life of his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be rejected.