

# Say What?

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## Hope in the Midst of Fear: Psalm 34

### Intro

Psalm 34 is a psalm of king David. Unlike many of the psalms in the Bible, this psalm has a superscription before it begins telling us its historical setting. This psalm teaches us how to look at fear in difficult times. Also, the psalm mentions two important Old Testament concepts that we will explore in Digging Deeper: the fear of the Lord and the angel of the Lord. Finally, at the end of the psalm we find a prophecy about Jesus which we will examine in more detail.

### Background for Psalm 34

Psalm 34 is a psalm of individual praise. It's an alphabetical psalm meaning the initial letters of successive lines come from the Hebrew alphabet or some part of it. This literary pattern was an aid for the Israelites in memorizing these psalms. The superscription before the psalm relates Psalm 34 to the incident of David's pretending to be insane in 1 Samuel 21:11-15. The Philistine king's name was "Achish," but he is referred to here by his dynastic title "Abimelech," meaning "my father is king." David gives a general principle based on his experience that those who look in faith to God for help will ultimately not suffer shame (Psa. 34:5). The fact that David's bones were not broken (34:20) pointed ultimately to Jesus in his crucifixion (see John 19:36) (Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, Tyndale, 213).

### The Fear of the Lord

In the ancient world when people encountered a power they did not understand, it was said that they feared it. However, a blind terror of some unknown power is not what the Old Testament means by the "fear of the Lord." In fact, when Moses tells the people what God had revealed to him, he explicitly says "do not fear" (Exodus 20:20), and yet he goes on to say that God came so that the "fear of him" may be before their eyes (the words for "fear" in the Hebrew mean basically the same thing). Is this a



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*"Let us run with  
perseverance the race  
marked out for us."  
Hebrews 12:1*

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contradiction? No, Moses wanted them to know that they need not fear as if they faced something unknown or unpredictable (the root cause of fear in pagan religions), but to live in the sober awareness of who God is.

The Hebrew fear of the Lord was to be unique. In pagan religions people live in constant fear of the spirits which they must seek to appease. Israel's fear of God was rather an awesome realization that the holy God had turned to them and chosen them to be his people. Therefore, they were to walk in fear, but a fear that lead to confidence and trust, and not to paralyzing uncertainty. Wisdom, the art of forming wise and successful plans, begins with the fear of the Lord (Psalm 111:10). The parallel phrase adds: "a good understanding have all those who practice it." So fear was not primarily an emotion, but a way of life based on a sober estimate of God's presence and care. Such an attitude includes emotion, but this fear leads to life and satisfaction (Proverbs 19:23). We should not expect that we know the fear of God perfectly now. For Jeremiah says that when the everlasting covenant has been made, the fear of God will be put in their hearts, that they may not turn from the Lord (Jeremiah 32:40) (William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, IVP, 162).

### **Angel of the Lord**

In a number of places in the Old Testament we encounter the angel of the Lord. He acts on behalf of Israel and various individuals. He comes across as somewhat of a mysterious figure in the Old Testament and this has given rise to a number of different theories about this figure and his relationship to God. In some of the passages the angel of the Lord is identified with God. In other passages the two persons are distinguished. For example in Exodus 3:2 and 6, the angel of the Lord says, "I am the God of your father." But in other passages, like Genesis 16:11 where the angel says to Hagar, "The Lord has heard your misery," the Lord and the angel of the Lord seem to be distinguished. Some people think this angel is just an angel with a special commission But passages like Exodus 3 make this unlikely. Since the early church many have believed that the angel of the Lord is a temporary manifestation of the preincarnate Jesus. It is likely that the angel of the Lord is either a temporarily visible experience of God in human form or in fact the preincarnate Jesus (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker, 467-468).

### **Jesus in Psalm 34**

In John 19:36, John points out the fact that none of Jesus' bones were broken. This fulfilled the prophecy about the Messiah's bones not being broken in Psalm 34:20. It also shows that Jesus is the perfect Passover lamb since Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12 say that no bone of the Passover lamb may be broken. This is the third time in chapter 19 that John points out that Jesus' death fulfilled OT Scripture (John 19:24 and 28 being the other two places). It was important for Jesus' bones not to be broken since Jesus was taking the place of the sacrificial lamb of the OT. Because of Jesus' relatively quick death his legs were not broken (unlike those crucified with him), and when his body was pierced by a spear no bones were damaged. John connects Jesus' death on the cross with God's deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt. This verse, then, was a very powerful example of Jesus' role in salvation (Andreas J. Kostenberger, "John" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Baker, 503-504).

### **Overcoming Fear**

When God calls you to be free from fear as you do evangelism, as you take a test, as you face an interview, as you take a stand against an unjust business practice, as you confront someone with sin in their life, when you leave a secure position and take a risk in a new venture, when you face an

operation or a treatment, when you lose a spouse or a friend—when God calls you to be free from fear (to overcome this natural emotion and have peace), he does not leave the command hanging in the air. He puts pillars under it. That's the nature of all biblical commands. They come with divine support. They are based on the way God actually works in the world.

The key to overcoming fear is resting on the pillars of the promises of God. In the Old Testament God regularly reminded his people that they had no reason to fear because (these are taken from Isaiah 41:1-13): 1) God is with them, 2) He is their God, 3) He will strengthen them, 4) He will help them, and 5) He will uphold them. On top of this understanding the greatness of God will intensify your faith and your fearlessness. When we understand who the God is who we trust in, we will have great confidence in these promises. This is no weak God who we listen to. This is the almighty Creator of the universe. As such, He is able to make these promises and back them up (John Piper, "Fear Not, I Am With You, I Am Your God", found at <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex>).

How do you pray in the midst of crisis? More than any other portion of Scripture, Psalms shows us how. Beginning with Psalm 3, and over and over again until Psalm 149, we find the psalmist crying out to the Lord in various dire circumstances: "How many are my foes!" "Give me relief from my distress." "Listen to my cry for help." "Away from me, all you who do evil." "Save and deliver me from all who pursue me."

In seven out of every ten psalms, the writer is either crying out to the Lord for physical salvation, thanking God for sparing his life, reminding himself of the differing fates of the righteous and evildoers, or renewing his allegiance to God and His Word in the face of rampant wickedness. Of all the psalmists, Solomon alone fails to use the vocabulary of the oppressed. The other psalmists employ scores of terms to describe their troubles. "Against" 82 times. "Enemy" and "enemies" 94 times. "Wicked" and "wickedly" and "wickedness" 108 times.

Of the 13 psalm titles that refer to some historical situation in David's life, 10 speak of David's enemies pursuing him. Two others indicate David had been delivered from the clutches of a particular evildoer. Asaph and the sons of Korah also cry out to God about violent people in many of their writings. Even the "prayer of Moses" in Psalm 90, the oldest of all the psalms, is a sorrowful plea for deliverance after years of affliction.

If the psalms teach us anything, it's how to turn to God in times of trouble and distress. Here's a brief synopsis with specific examples from various psalms:

1. Call out to the Lord...(Psalm 61:1).
2. ...and ask for help! (Psalm 70:1).
3. Tell God about your troubles...(Psalm 79:1-4).
4. ...and admit if you feel abandoned or forsaken (Psalm 89:46-47).
5. Describe what you want God to do... (Psalm 90:15-17).
6. ...and explain why He should act on your behalf (Psalm 102:18-22).
7. Honestly evaluate your guilt or innocence...(Psalm 119:30-31).
8. ...and confess any known sins (Psalm 119:176).
9. Affirm your implicit trust in the Lord...(Psalm 121:1-2).
10. ...and then praise God for His deliverance (Psalm 124:6-8). (David Sanford, "How to Pray in the Midst of Crisis", <http://www.epm.org>).

### **Final Thoughts**

Psalm 34 reminds us that as Christians we are to reject hopeless fear. Instead of having fear, we need to realize that God is control and that he is working in whatever situation we face. Rather than fear the unknown, other people, or our circumstances, we should have a healthy fear of the Lord. This fear is not sheer terror at God's power. Instead, it is a reverent awe of who God is.

### **Home Group Questions**

1. Does having fear reveal a lack of faith in God? Why or why not?
2. What is the biggest obstacle to overcoming fear?
3. What does it mean to fear the Lord?
4. Read Proverbs 1:7. How is the fear of the Lord the beginning of knowledge?
5. What evidence is there in this psalm that the Lord is with us in difficult times?
6. How can understanding God's character help you overcome fear?

### **Personal Application**

7. What areas of life give you the greatest fear? How does this psalm respond to your fears?