

Reorientation (toward praise)

Ps. 34:1-14

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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¹*I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.*

²*My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.*

³*O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.*

⁴*I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.*

⁵*Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.*

⁶*This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.*

⁷*The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.*

⁸*O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.*

⁹*O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want.*

¹⁰*The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*

¹¹*Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.*

¹²*Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?*

¹³*Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.*

¹⁴*Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.*

Some of you may know the name John Dear—no, not the green tractors that used to go put-put—but John Dear [D-e-a-r], a Catholic priest and peace activist from CA. Early in his career John Dear felt obligated to support an inmate on death row, since he opposed the death penalty. He contacted an inmate in GA who was convicted of murder when he was only 19, and said he wanted to correspond with him. But Dear let the inmate know that he was a very busy person, so he couldn't get too involved. (For the purposes of this story, I'll call the inmate Derek.)

Three times Derek came within a few hours of being executed. Finally there was a hearing, at which the family of the person Derek had murdered was present. The family begged for mercy for their relative's killer. Derek was released from prison, got married, had children, and became a pastor in GA—as good an outcome as could be expected.

But here's the part of this story that is relevant to this morning. When John Dear first contacted him, Derek responded: "I've found Jesus in prison, I'm doing fine, but you sound like a mess. You need me more than I need you." John Dear protested, but Derek persisted. For nearly a decade from prison Derek sent John Dear a letter of encouragement every week. Along the way, Derek said that what got him through prison and death row was praying Psalm 34 every day, the very Psalm I'm preaching on this morning.

The superscription identifies Psalm 34 with a particular time in King David's life when he was in a tight spot and was afraid of being captured and even killed by a Philistine king. To get himself out of this tight spot, David acted like a madman, like one who had lost his senses. You can read about it in 1 Samuel 21.

Whether it was David or another psalmist who wrote Psalm 34—this Psalmist apparently was in a tight spot. Consequently, he sought the Lord, and cried out to the Lord for help.

Help! This is the most elemental of prayers, and probably the most repeated prayer. A few years ago Anne Lamott published a little book with the title, *Help, Thanks, Wow: the Three Essential Prayers*. I think she forgot one essential prayer: forgive me. Nevertheless, these are essential prayers, prayers of intercession, thanksgiving, and praise. And in Psalm 34 we get at least two of these prayers, prayers for help and of praise and thanksgiving for God's help.

The Psalmist testified that God heard his cry for help, delivered him from all his fears, and saved him from every trouble. Now that last claim might make us wonder if the Psalmist was engaging in hyperbole: saved him from every trouble. Really? That doesn't sound very realistic. But what about that first claim: God delivered him from all his fears. Wouldn't that, in itself, be an amazing answer to prayer.

Two forces seem to drive us as humans, among others: our hopes and fears. If you want to truly get to know another person intimately, get to know their hopes and fears. Frankly, if we want to get to know ourselves better, we should be in touch with our own hopes and fears.

The problem with our fears is that they can consume us and drive us to take irrational measures that only enhance our fears and make the cause of the fear worse. Think war, for example. A line from our hymn of the month underscores this: "A rusty sword is the way of the world, whose pain can only increase." The Psalmist's antidotes to his fears were: **fear the Lord; take refuge in the Lord; trust the Lord.**

Parenthetically, Psalm 34 isn't a lament, although it has some elements of a lament. The interesting thing about laments in the Psalms is that almost all of them at some point in the psalm make a dramatic shift from lament and complaint to praise and thanksgiving for God.

Here's the amazing thing about that shift: the shift in disposition comes about without the reason for the original lament being removed. There's an attitudinal shift on the part of psalmist which takes his mind off his problems and focuses it on God. (Now my wife reminded me this week that we don't know how much time transpired between the original lament and the eventual shift toward thanksgiving. True enough.)

The point I want to make clear here is that having our fears quelled and removed is itself a great answer to prayer. Facing our troubles without fear by finding refuge in God is a splendid answer to prayer. To be freed from our fears, even if not from our troubles, is a wonderful outcome.

You know the old Stoic adage: we can't control all that happens to us, but we can control how we respond to what happens to us. I'd add, **with God's help** we can modify how we respond to life's inevitable challenges and troubles.

Many of our fears have to do with worries about the future. John Darrow, the spiritual director in Susan Howatch's Church of England fiction series, said to one of his directees, "Don't worry about things that might never happen." I have to keep reminding myself of that.

Please hear me out, now, because I'm coming to the heart of my sermon: the Psalmist starts this psalm with praise: *I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth*. The fact the Psalmist chooses to lead with praise may conceal the fact that his praise was the conclusion of a long experience of being in a tight spot, crying out to God for help, taking refuge in God, and then being rescued from his troubles. But the psalmist wants his readers to know that what really matters in his experience is praising and blessing God.

What does it mean to bless God? What does it mean to bless anyone, for that manner? It means to say good things to them about them. It means to praise and exalt and thank them. To bless God is to praise and exalt and thank God directly. It means to testify to what God has done for us. And please note: the Psalmist includes an invitation to join him in this blessing: *let us exult his name together*. Praising and blessing God is an essential part of worship, of both private and corporate worship. And it's not just something we do; it becomes something we are, a people of praise.

But here's the thing: God doesn't need our praises and our blessings. If God would need them, then God wouldn't be sufficient without us, and God wouldn't be God. (Theologians have a fancy word for this: aseity. God is self-originating and self-determinant.) Although God wants to be in fellowship with us, God doesn't need our praises; we need to praise God. Praising God reorients our lives around God, rather than ourselves and our troubles. And the magnification principle kicks in: what we tend to focus on becomes larger and other things fade into the background. Magnifying God means we ourselves and our worries and troubles become less onerous.

We don't praise God for pragmatic reasons; it's not transactional—if we praise God, God will do such and such for us. No, we praise God because of who God is. But praising God has a consequence: it reorients our lives around God, rather than ourselves or the worries of this life and world. The worries and troubles don't go away, but they are put in perspective.

If you want to change your life, start by praising, blessing, and exalting God. This reorientation around the praise of God is something I want to commit myself to.

A few years ago I had a conversation with a Bible teacher at one of our Mennonite church colleges. She said to me: "When my Catholic or evangelical students talk about their faith, it usually has to do with God, and sometimes with worship. When my Mennonite students talk about their faith, it is usually about ethics—what we do as disciples of Jesus."

There is both a commendation and a criticism in that report. Commendation for Mennonites taking their faith seriously with the intent of living it out in daily life, criticism for making our

faith foremost about what we do, rather than who God is and what God does for and through us.

Sensing the tendency among us Mennonites to make faith about ourselves, the pastoral team at College Mennonite Church did a study of worship services at CMC. They wanted to discern how much previous worship services were about us as disciples and how much about God. As I recall, the outcome was that the pastoral team became more intentional about making worship God-focused rather than we-focused.

Here's a riddle for you (from Anne Lamott—this must be my Anne Lamott sermon): “What’s the difference between you and God? God never thinks he’s God.” Yes, God alone is God, not we ourselves. And God is worthy of our praise. Our praises underscore for us that we are not God, God is God, and praising God reorients our lives around God instead of ourselves and our circumstances.

As a preacher I have never had the illusion that people would remember much of what I’ve said. But sermons I’ve heard that I tend to remember are the times when a preacher would give the congregation a little assignment, perhaps a spiritual discipline. Like one Sunday we were encouraged to pray for the city of Goshen every time we hear that test alarm going off at 2 p.m., Thursday afternoon. That was years ago and I still pray for Goshen every time I hear it.

Here is my assignment for this week. Try read Psalm 34 every day. And as the week progresses and you start to have a greater familiarity with it, don’t just read it, but try to pray it—to God.

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.... O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. Amen.